



From Teacher-Led to Learner-Centered: Rethinking Heritage Language Classrooms in Canada

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TEACHER FRONTED



LEARNER CENTERED



From Teacher-Led to Learner-Centered: Rethinking Heritage Language Classrooms in Canada

Heritage language teachers in Canada are often trained in traditional, teacher-directed frameworks

Their students - Canadian-born children of immigrant families - grow up with learner-centered educational expectations

Pedagogical adjustments are needed when teaching these learners in a Canadian context

Common challenges arise from differing cultural and instructional norms

Practical strategies can foster participatory, learner-centered classrooms (some strategies are embedded into the session itself)

Cultural foundations central to heritage language education must be preserved throughout this transition



Discuss: What's your biggest tension / challenge in Heritage Language teaching? Why?

- 1. Student engagement*
- 2. Student behavior*
- 3. Student retention*
- 4. Parent expectations*
- 5. Language level range*
- 6. Curriculum*
- 7. Other??*



Bonus Question: Which of the above would you like this session to focus on?



Discuss: *What's your biggest tension / challenge in Heritage Language teaching? Why?*

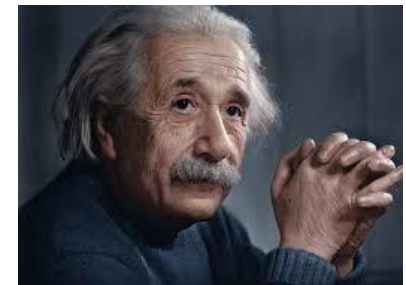
- 1. Student engagement*
- 2. Student behavior*
- 3. Student retention*
- 4. Parent expectations*
- 5. Language level range*
- 6. Curriculum*
- 7. Other??*

Session Focus: *Small shifts that keep cultural strengths while increasing student agency.*

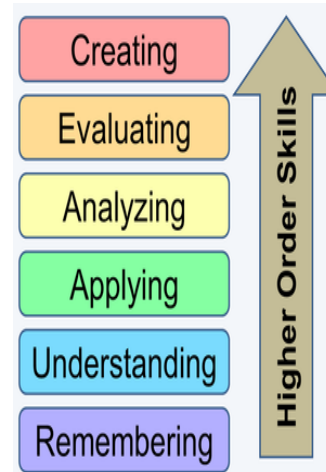


Learner-Centered Education

- **John Dewey:** *"Education is not an affair of 'telling' and being told, but an active and constructive process."*
- **Maria Montessori:** *"The greatest sign of success for a teacher is to be able to say, 'The children are now working as if I did not exist.'"*
- **Benjamin Franklin:** *"Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn."*
- **Albert Einstein:** *"I never teach my pupils; I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn."*



Learner Orientation



**Traditional / East /
Teacher Fronted**

**Constructivist / West /
Learner Centered**

Information Transmission Framework

Sage on the Stage

Exam Driven

Individual Effort + Competitive

Passive / Quiet / Receptive

Memorization

Rigid Content



Constructivism

Student Voice

Empowering

Collaborative

Active Learning

Authentic

Flexible and Adaptable



(Knowles, 2020; Roessingh, 2004)



Activity: Look at the mismatch assigned to you and discuss:
“What do students do? What do teachers do?”
(3 minutes to discuss & 40 seconds to share)



Traditional Teacher-Centered Classroom

Student-Centered Principles

1. Information Transmission Framework:

Knowledge is delivered from teacher to student.

2. Sage on the Stage: The teacher decides what is learned and how it is taught.

3. Exam Driven: Success is measured mainly by tests, grades, and coverage.

4. Individual Effort + Competitive: Students work mostly alone and compete with one another.

5. Passive / Quiet / Receptive: Students are expected to listen, receive, and respond when called on.

6. Memorization: Learning focuses on recalling facts and correct answers.

7. Rigid Content: The curriculum stays fixed regardless of students' interests or needs.

1. Constructivism: Students build on what they already know.

2. Student Voice: Students share what they want to learn and how they learn best.

3. Empowering: Students take charge of their own learning.

4. Collaborate: Students learn by working and sharing ideas with others.

5. Active Learning: Students learn by doing, practicing, and reflecting.

6. Authentic: Students learn through real topics and problems that matter to them.

7. Flexible and Adaptable: Teachers adjust learning based on students' needs and interests.



Who do you want to be?

Constructivism: Students build on what they already know.

Student Voice: Students share what they want to learn and how they learn best.

Empowering: Students take charge of their own learning.

Collaborative: Students learn by working and sharing ideas with others.

Active Learning: Students learn by doing, practicing, and reflecting.

Authentic: Students learn through real topics and problems that matter to them.

Flexible and Adaptable: Teachers adjust learning based on students' needs and interests.



Strategy Toolkit

- Turn information transfer into “constructive project”
- Turn a lecture into “guided discovery”



HERITAGE LANGUAGE SPEAKING PROJECT

My Family Story or Community Story

Find examples of the following student-centered learning principles in the speaking project.

1. **Constructivism:** Students build on what they already know.
2. **Student Voice:** Students share what they want to learn and how they learn best.
3. **Empowering:** Students take charge of their own learning.
4. **Collaborate:** Students learn by working and sharing ideas with others.
5. **Active Learning:** Students learn by doing, practicing, and reflecting.
6. **Authentic:** Students learn through real topics and problems that matter to them.
7. **Flexible and Adaptable:** Teachers adjust learning based on students' needs and interests.



HERITAGE LANGUAGE SPEAKING PROJECT

My Family Story or Community Story (Activity Key)

1. **Constructivism:** Learners use what they already know in the heritage language and build on family knowledge, words, and experiences from home, especially when they collect words and ideas they already know and talk with family members in Step 2.
2. **Student Voice:** Learners choose a topic that matters to them, such as a family member, food, tradition, song, or celebration, and decide how to share it in Step 1 and Step 5.
3. **Empowering:** Students take charge of their own learning by choosing their topic, gathering language from home, preparing a speaking support, and sharing in the way that matches their confidence level.
4. **Collaborate:** Students learn by working and sharing ideas with others, for example when they talk with family members in Step 2 and practice speaking with classmates in pairs or small groups in Step 3.



HERITAGE LANGUAGE SPEAKING PROJECT

My Family Story or Community Story (Activity Key)

5. Active Learning: Students learn by doing, practicing, and reflecting as they gather words, rehearse with classmates, create a simple speaking support, present orally, and complete self-assessment.

6. Authentic: Students learn through real topics and meaningful communication because the project connects to family stories, home traditions, foods, celebrations, and real conversations with family and classmates.

7. Flexible and Adaptable: Teachers adjust learning based on students' needs and interests by offering choices, visuals, sentence starters, picture cards, teacher-prepared word boxes, and different sharing options such as partner, group, class, audio, or video.



Learner-Centered?

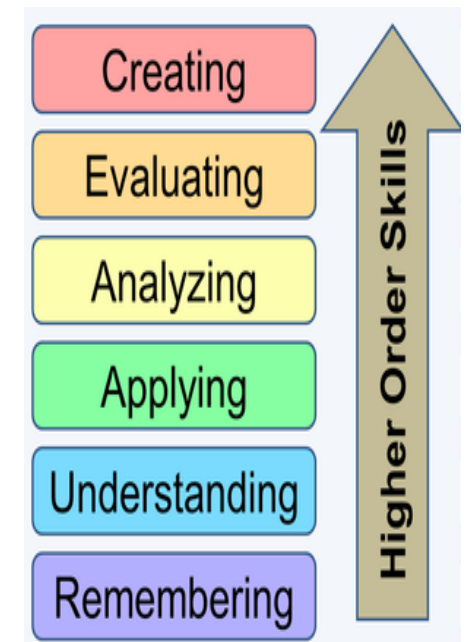
- "Today I will explain the past tense rule. Please listen and take notes."
- "Look at these sentences. What do you notice about how the past tense is formed?"



Learner-Centered: Guided Discovery

- **Information transmission:** "Today I will explain the past tense rule. Please listen and take notes."
- **Guided discovery:** "Look at these sentences. What do you notice about how the past tense is formed?"

Information Transmission	Guided Discovery
Teacher tells	Teacher guides
Students receive information	Students uncover information
Focus on explanation	Focus on noticing and thinking
Often lecture-based	Often task or question-based
Students are more passive	Students are more active
Teacher is the main source of knowledge	Teacher is a facilitator of learning



Guided Discovery

Heritage Language Lesson Plan Outline

Skim through **Heritage Language Lesson Plan Outline**.

Reflect: Is this something you already do in your HL classes? If not, do you think it might be possible?



Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) Approach

What is a task?



Jane Willis

- "Tasks are activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome."
(From: *Framework for Task-Based Learning*, 1996)

Rod Ellis

- "A task is a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed."
(From: *Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching*, 2003)



David Nunan

- "Task-based language teaching is an approach to the design of language courses in which the point of departure is not an ordered list of linguistic items, but a collection of tasks."
(From: *Task-Based Language Teaching*, 2004)

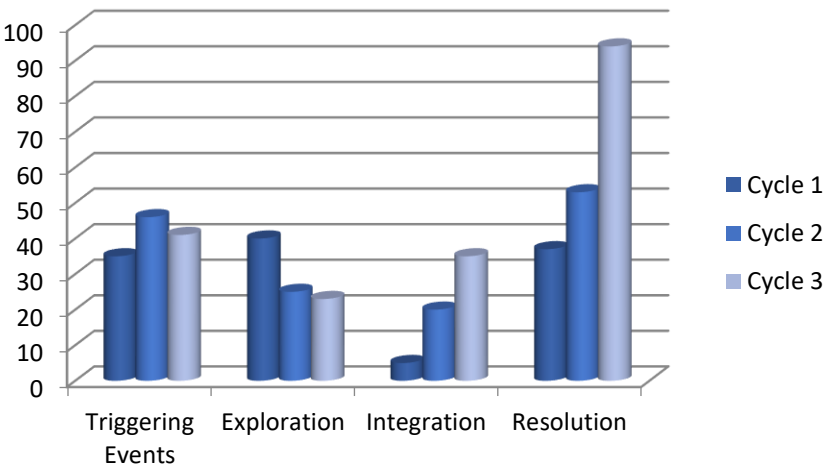
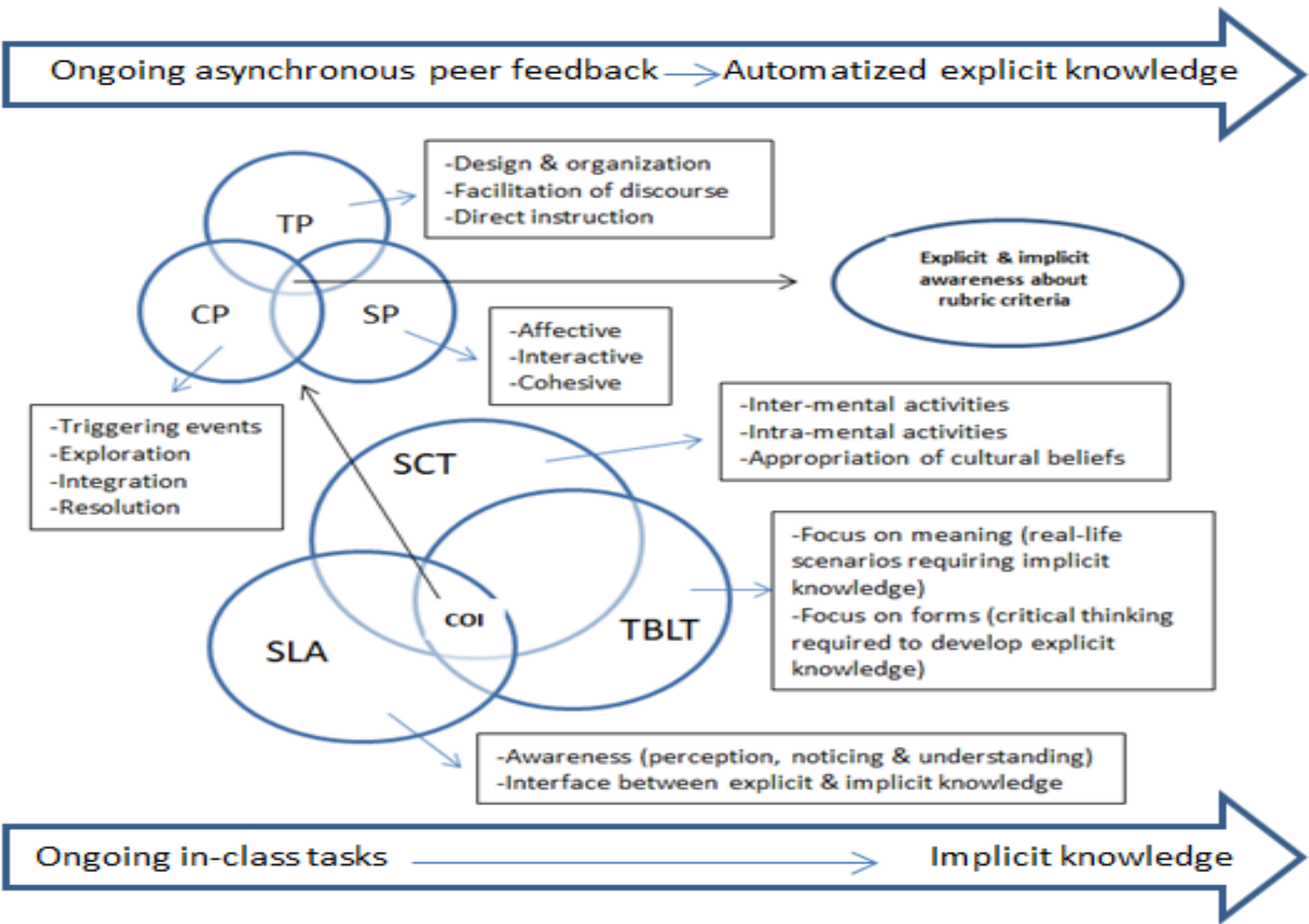


Core Principles of TBLT

- **Prioritizing communication of meaning over grammatical accuracy**
 - Learners choose and use language to express real ideas (linguistic & non-linguistic)
 - There's some kind of gap (information, opinion etc.)
 - Errors are part of learning and are addressed in context
 - Language is acquired through meaningful use
 - Example: Students plan an event together, focusing on communicating ideas, not grammar perfection
- **Exposure to language used in real-world situations (authentic language)**
 - Tasks mirror daily interactions (e.g., making appointments, asking for help)
 - Learners become familiar with natural speech patterns and expressions
 - Boost practical communication skills and confidence
 - Example: Role-playing a phone conversation to make a reservation
- **Tasks are designed with specific, practical goals (outcome oriented)**
 - Learners complete meaningful tasks with clear end results
 - Encourages motivation and collaboration
 - Language is used as a tool to achieve a real-world objective
 - Example: Completing a survey and presenting results to the class



Raising Awareness in TBLT Classes



(Kunnel, 2021)

Which of the following are authentic tasks?

Target Learners: Young Learners

1. Story time with grandparents
2. Cooking with parents
3. Matching the word to its definition from a list
4. Rehearsing for community events
5. Organizing a family event
6. Filling in the blanks with the correct form of the verb
7. Calling or writing to relatives in the home country
8. Participating in religious or cultural events
9. Reading a short passage and answering multiple-choice questions
10. Shopping or ordering food in an ethnic community store
11. Explaining Canadian life (school, weather, holidays) to elders or children in the heritage language
12. Memorizing a scripted conversation about buying fruit

Authentic Tasks =
Authentic Learning



Non-Authentic Tasks in TBLT

- **Gap-fill grammar exercises**
 - Example: Fill in the blanks with the correct form of the verb "to be."
 - Problem: Focuses on form, not meaning or real communication.
- **Repetition drills**
 - Example: "Repeat after me: This is a pen. This is a pen."
 - Problem: Doesn't require processing meaning or real interaction.
- **Matching vocabulary with definitions**
 - Example: Match the word to its definition from a list.
 - Problem: Useful for vocabulary, but not a communicative task.
- **Reading comprehension questions with no output**
 - Example: Read a short passage and answer multiple-choice questions.
 - Problem: Does not lead to spoken or written communication.
- **Artificial role plays without context**
 - Example: Pretend you are a robot talking to another robot.
 - Problem: Unrealistic context, no real-world application.
- **Conjugation tables**
 - Example: Write all forms of irregular verbs in a table.
 - Problem: Grammar-focused, not communicative.
- **Memorizing and reciting dialogues**
 - Example: Memorize a scripted conversation about buying fruit.
 - Problem: No creativity, interaction, or negotiation of meaning.

Tasks for Young Learners

1. My Favorite Food

Goal: Describe a favorite traditional dish.

Task: Bring a photo or drawing of the food and describe:

What is it? // Who makes it? // When do you eat it? //How does it taste?

Language focus: Descriptive language (salty, sweet), food vocabulary, simple present tense.

2. Show and Tell from Home

Goal: Share an item that represents your culture.

Task: Bring something special from home (e.g., a small object, clothing, or picture) and say:

What is it? // Who gave it to you? // Why is it special?

Language focus: Personal pronouns, present/past tense, basic sentences.

3. Make a Family Tree

Goal: Talk about your family in your heritage language.

Task: Create a simple family tree and introduce each person:

“This is my grandma. She lives in ____.” // “My uncle cooks ____.”

Language focus: Family terms, possessives (my/mine), simple descriptions.

4. Record a Message for Grandma or Grandpa

Goal: Practice speaking to elders in the heritage language.

Task: Record a voice message saying hello, asking how they are, or telling them something fun that happened.

Language focus: Polite greetings, feelings, question forms.

5. Create a Picture Dictionary

Goal: Learn and use words around a cultural theme (e.g., home, clothing, body parts, animals).

Task: Make a mini-book with drawings and labels. Practice presenting it to the class or in a small group.

Language focus: Nouns, colors, basic verbs.

Tasks that develop language skills while also strengthening identity, pride, and community connection ...

1. Interview a Family Member

- **Task:** Interview a parent, grandparent, or elder in your heritage language about their immigration story or a childhood memory.
Outcome: Share a written or oral report in class or with your family.
 - *Skills:* Listening, speaking, question formation, cultural awareness.

2. Create a Family Recipe Book

- **Task:** Collect traditional recipes by talking with relatives, and write them in your heritage language, with instructions and cultural notes.
Outcome: Compile and publish a small recipe book or class blog.
 - *Skills:* Writing instructions, vocabulary for food, sequencing.

3. Plan a Cultural Event or Holiday Celebration

- **Task:** In small groups, plan a community celebration for a cultural holiday (e.g., Nowruz, Diwali, Lunar New Year) and present your plan.
Outcome: Create flyers or event schedules in the heritage language.
 - *Skills:* Group planning, persuasive speaking, writing promotional material.



Tasks that develop language skills while also strengthening identity, pride, and community connection ...

4. Design a Heritage Language Poster for Younger Learners

- **Task:** Make a visual poster teaching simple words, phrases, or proverbs in your heritage language for younger children.
Outcome: Present it at a school or community center.
 - *Skills:* Vocabulary, instructional writing, layout/design.

5. Record a Family Tradition or Custom

- **Task:** Describe and reflect on a family tradition (wedding, festival, rite of passage) in the heritage language.
Outcome: Record a short video or audio explanation to share with classmates.
 - *Skills:* Oral narrative, cultural vocabulary, reflective writing.

6. Translate a Children's Story

- **Task:** Choose a simple children's story and translate it into your heritage language for a younger sibling or community library.
Outcome: Create a bilingual storybook or read aloud for a class video.
 - *Skills:* Translation, cultural adaptation, storytelling.



Tasks that develop language skills while also strengthening identity, pride, and community connection

8. Conduct a Survey in the Community

- **Task:** Design and conduct a survey in the heritage language to ask community members about language use, cultural practices, or generational changes.
Outcome: Analyze and present the findings in class.
 - *Skills:* Question formation, data collection, presenting results.

9. Write and Perform a Skit

- **Task:** With a partner or group, write a short skit in the heritage language based on a cultural misunderstanding, folktale, or family scenario.
Outcome: Perform it for peers or at a community event.
 - *Skills:* Speaking fluency, cultural context, collaboration.

10. Create a Digital Heritage Scrapbook

- **Task:** Build a digital or physical scrapbook that includes photos, artifacts, and captions in the heritage language to tell your family's story.
Outcome: Present your scrapbook to the class or family.
 - *Skills:* Writing captions, narrative structure, technology integration.

Source: Adapted with help from ChatGPT



Adapting TBLT for Multi-Level Learners

1. Use Open-Ended Tasks

Design tasks with **multiple entry points and outcomes**, so learners at different levels can contribute:

Example: Planning a community event. Beginners can list food or activities; advanced learners can create a schedule or budget.

2. Group Strategically

Use **heterogeneous grouping** to allow peer support:

Stronger learners help lead, while others observe and gradually participate. Rotate roles so everyone practices different skills.

3. Provide Scaffolding

Offer **tiered supports**:

Sentence starters, word banks, visuals for lower-level learners

Encourage extended speaking or writing for higher-level learners

4. Differentiate Outputs

Allow learners to **complete the same task with different language demands**:

A poster, a short paragraph, or a formal email depending on proficiency

5. Focus on Communication

Prioritize **meaningful communication over perfect accuracy**, allowing all learners to succeed.

Focus on providing formative individual feedback during class and on assignments.



Learner-Centered HLL: Benefits

1. Builds on learners' existing knowledge and strengths
2. Supports cultural identity and sense of belonging
3. Increases motivation through meaningful, personal learning
4. Responds to mixed proficiency levels and diverse needs
5. Encourages active use of the heritage language
6. Builds confidence and learner agency
7. Connects learning to real family and community contexts
8. Promotes collaboration and intergenerational learning



Role of HL Teacher

1. Facilitator of learning
2. Builder on students' prior knowledge
3. Supporter of student voice and identity
4. Designer of authentic tasks
5. Guide for mixed-level learners
6. Encourager of active participation
7. Builder of confidence and agency
8. Preserver of cultural values
9. Bridge between home, school, and community



Challenges for HL Teachers

1. Mixed levels
2. Literacy gaps
3. Majority language dominance
4. Parent expectations
5. Teacher mindset shift
6. Balancing culture and autonomy
7. Limited time and resources
8. Participation and confidence issues
9. Assessment difficulties



Challenges and Possible Solutions

Challenge

1. Mixed proficiency levels
2. Limited literacy skills
3. Strong dominance of the majority language
4. Different learner motivations and goals
5. Pressure from parents for traditional teaching
6. Teacher preparation rooted in teacher-centered systems
7. Difficulty balancing cultural values with student autonomy
8. Limited class time
9. Lack of appropriate teaching materials
10. Classroom management challenges
11. Student reluctance to speak
12. Assessment challenges



Solution

1. Use differentiated tasks, flexible grouping, and tiered support.
2. Connect reading and writing to familiar oral language and scaffold literacy step by step.
3. Increase meaningful exposure to the heritage language through interaction, routines, and authentic tasks.
4. Offer choice and connect lessons to family, identity, and real-life purposes.
5. Communicate the value of learner-centered methods and show how they still support strong learning outcomes.
6. Provide professional development, reflection, and gradual shifts in teaching practice.
7. Make cultural values explicit while using participation structures that still honor respect and community.
8. Use short, high-impact activities and prioritize meaningful language use over excessive content coverage.
9. Adapt existing resources and create culturally relevant, learner-focused materials.
10. Use clear routines, structured interaction, and simple participation rules.
11. Create a safe, low-risk environment with sentence frames, pair work, and encouragement.
12. Use formative assessment, observation, reflection, and performance-based tasks to measure growth.



Exit Ticket:

One thing I'm taking away today is _____

One question I still have is _____

Thank You
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