

Six Keys to Magical Moments in Elementary

Annabelle Allen



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“The younger the better!” We have all heard it. Everyone I know, whether they teach a language or not, says that the best time to introduce a new language is when students are young. So that must mean that elementary language teachers have the easiest job of anyone, right? No, it doesn’t mean that, but it CAN mean that they have the most fun! You do have the opportunity to create a magical environment in your classroom where language exploration is treasured, valued, and sought after by each and every child that crosses the threshold. I recently wrote a blog about the steps I take for setting up an elementary language classroom during the first week of school. I want to expand upon that here, and explain some very important techniques that, when used together, create a powerful, successful learning environment for your students. These six tools will help you to establish a safe, fun, routine-based, classroom community where little language learners will acquire language and thrive!

1. Body Language

Your body language communicates SO much. From the minute students walk in your door you should be on their level. Making eye contact with them as they come in the door and smiling at each one of them and greeting them with a simple “hello” in the target language (TL). As you begin class, your body language

should exude confidence, excitement, and control. Students want to see you as the expert and “leader” of the classroom. Praise them with your body language. When they are following your expectations and rules, give them lots of high fives! I am known for jumping around and squealing when students are doing what I want them to. I had a student today tell me that he counted I gave out 42 high fives in the 45-minute period. I don’t doubt it. This praise and excitement creates buy-in. Students WANT to do well. Body language is more important in a foreign language classroom than any other! TPR is an essential part of establishing meaning and creating a kinesthetic connection for children to the language you are sharing with them. Your language should be very simple and sheltered, with lots of TPR (most especially in the first few classes). As you tell them to stand up, YOU should stand up and signal their movements with your arms. As you tell them to touch their heads YOU should touch your head. Your body language and TPR will help make meaning, and help to ensure children feel successful and safe in your classroom.

2. Tone

For many little ones, the first day of a language class is terrifying. The thought of going into a classroom and not understanding anything is incredibly daunting. As a comprehensible input teacher, I know I am not going to be speaking to my kids in English all the time, in fact quite the opposite! I want to be spending 90-95% of my class time in my target language. Presenting your language classroom and methodology in a non-threatening way on the first days of school has a lot to do with tone. As you greet your students at the door with a “hello” in the TL it should be in a happy, cheerful tone. Smile as you are at eye-level with them. Let them hear the excitement in your voice. We convey so much through our tone; that is why children as toddlers understand much of what is going on even before they fully understand language. As you start speaking in the TL (with simple TPR gestures), do so with a happy voice, full of excitement and praise. Tone is two-sided. While I strongly encourage keeping a happy tone, I also reserve sad, stern, and serious tones for when students are not following the expectations I am setting for them. Tone of voice and praise for students with high fives and body language should work for buy-in and convincing your class to play along. If you notice they need more encouragement, try switching the tone of your voice first, to sound disappointed when some students aren’t doing what they are supposed to. I combine that tone with my point management system which works like gold with young students.

3. Slow, Slow, Slow

You can NEVER go slowly enough. Pause. Don’t be afraid to then pause again. Go even slower. If you feel bored, really bored, you are probably speaking at the

right speed. Don't feel like you have to jump into lots of language fast! You can be excited, and be slow. They need you to be slow. Slower than slow. They want to understand you and going slowly ensures that they feel like they CAN understand you if they really listen with their eyes and their ears. Justin Slocum-Bailey wrote a wonderful blog on the power of slow comprehensible input. Did I say "slow" enough in this paragraph?

4. Clear, Simple, High Expectations

Students of all ages crave routines and structure. If students know exactly what is expected of them and if they know there are simple rules and routines to follow, they are less stressed or nervous about you speaking in the TL. Establishing rituals and routines in the first few weeks is essential, and yes, it does take time up front. It is crucial that you take the time to make sure the expectations are understood AND met before moving forward. Decide on clear classroom rules. The simpler the better! Mine are: 1. Respect, 2. Target Language, 3. Listen with your eyes and ears. Simple but all-encompassing rules. I take time to really explain these in English and ask students what they think each rule means; I also tell them my expectation. Establish a strong transition protocol with your students. I shout something out (¡Hola hola!) and they shout back something else (¡Coca Cola!). The expectation after this happens is that EVERY student is sitting quietly with their eyes on me and they are silent. We practice this about 20 times the first class. I praise them each time it is successful and if they DON'T do it successfully, we keep trying until they do. If you move on before everyone has it, that is setting the expectation that you don't need everyone to participate, and you never want to send that message. So, be very enthusiastic when you do get 100% participation. Praise them! Use your body language (high fives) and tone to let them know how happy you are. If you don't want to use your voice to shout, then use a bell or a noisemaker for your transition sound.

5. Movement

While I have already touched on TPR and body language for YOU, I haven't talked about how vitally important movement is for your students. Elementary students should be moving all the time. Have them do lots of TPR (don't forget to do it with them). When you are telling stories, you should stand students up and use them as actors. Blair Richards is amazing at engaging her students through movement and acting! The easiest way to incorporate movement is to remember how rigorous it is to listen to someone speak in another language for even 5 minutes. Give your students Brain Breaks and give them frequently. Brain Breaks do not have to be 5-minute-long games. They should be SHORT breaks in rigor. There are hundreds of ideas out there and the possibilities are endless. I have written about some in blogs, or you can see students in action on my YouTube

channel. You can also use 1-5 second Brain Breaks which I call Brain Bursts. For example, just stand students up and tell them to jump three times, then sit them back down. Remember, use your transition to make sure everyone is silent before you continue with the TL. Movement is a powerful tool to ensure active listening!

6. Smile! Share your passion!

There is a reason you became a teacher. Remember that reason. Hold onto your passion. Share that with your students! SMILE and show them that you love your job and you love your target language. Your passion will inspire them. After all, isn't that our goal? We want to spark an interest in students so they want to be life-long language learners. We want them to be as passionate about the language and culture we teach as we are. We hope that they achieve fluency in the language and then move on to acquire other languages, too. We want to spark in them a curiosity for other people, with customs, foods, traditions, and cultures different from their own. All of that stems from our own passion and love for what we do!

So there you have it! Six simple strategies that together will create an incredibly powerful language classroom! To sign off, I wish you the best of school years! Until next time, HAPPY TEACHING! Love, La Maestra Loca

Links to blog posts:

1. Annabelle Allen - First week of school
<https://lamaestralocablog.wordpress.com/2017/08/03/the-first-week-of-school-pre-k-to-high-school/>
2. Annabelle Allen - Point system
<https://lamaestralocablog.wordpress.com/2016/08/05/classroom-management-part-1/>
3. Justin Slocum Bailey - slowness and silence:
<http://indwellinglanguage.com/slowness-and-silence/>
4. Blair Richards - movement and acting
<https://madamemadamemadame.wordpress.com/2017/04/19/best-day-ever/>
5. Annabelle Allen - Brain breaks
<https://lamaestralocablog.wordpress.com/?s=brain+breaks>
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJQxKIyg5Ko8cGt1PTSWwwQ?view_as=subscriber
6. Annabelle Allen - Brain bursts
<https://lamaestralocablog.wordpress.com/2017/01/05/brain-breaks-part-5-brain-bursts/>

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