

**The Four Cs Strategy
in L2 Online and F2F Instruction**

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Through my years in the profession, the most rewarding teaching strategies for L2 in higher education I have practiced are what I summarize as The Four Cs: Contextualizing, Communication, Confidentiality, and Confidence. These fundamental and distinctive principles, often recommended to primary and secondary school educators¹, are also pivotal at the college and university level L2 courses by helping put students at ease when using the target language, creating a collaborative environment, and aiding instructors at gaining the students' trust and positive attitude as they develop proficiency in the target language. Following, are my own professional language-teaching strategies and best practices as I developed them over the years.

¹ The concept of the 4Cs as an acronym has been used with diverse meanings in education and in other fields for decades. In education, and in relation to the Common Core, the acronym is today used to refer to communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity. In a 1992 article about teaching languages in primary school, Keith Sharpe also resorts to the 4Cs acronym to discuss communication, culture, context, and confidence in particular practices and examples related to language teachers teaching L2 to children. Sharpe's findings and strategies limit themselves and are specific to that educational environment, and do not discuss the points and examples I share in the present article.

1. Contextualization

One of the best approaches I have experienced in teaching L2 at the college level has been contextualizing. Whether the text is lengthy or brief, I first give it a background. I put it in context, just as when we teach a film class and introduce the film to L2 students by presenting the background: In this case, beginning level students are given a simple, short, interesting, self-contained, and contextually significant passage from L2 prominent literature. The passage lends itself to the understanding of concepts and notions in relation to the film which might be known to some students and new to others. In this approach, cognates (Beinborn et al., 2014; Hammer & Giauque, 1988) as well as the use of glossaries and dictionaries, are of great help.

Contexts, better than texts, rise above the limits of textual comprehension and open more horizons, thus accounting for effective pedagogical means in the L2 classroom. They encompass texts and bring them to life. The more we offer a contextualization, the more students feel stimulated and get involved in the activity. While it might be perceived as frustrating for most L2 students to approach authentic reading material for the sake of merely reading it, without a targeted specific purpose in mind and taking into account the slower pace of reading a text in L2, it is much more stimulating when the text is framed in a context, therefore, aiding in answering comprehension questions as well as in expressing opinions, ideas, and critical thoughts. In this way, students approach the L2 text with a purpose by answering questions of semantic relevance, for example: What does the author mean by such and such expression in context? Questions involving why, when, where, and how, all pertaining to the semantic field, that are part of the quest for meaning, are easier for students to work with when given a specific context. Synthesis also becomes crucial for the contextually minded approach to L2 learning. However, it must be stressed that analysis lends itself more to the beginner L2 learner, while synthesis requires at

least intermediate or more advanced L2 levels for students, more acquired competence in performing their own sentence structuring, more creative skills, and a post beginner's L2 fluency. All in all, contextualizing promotes a more natural and satisfactory acquisition of the target language.

2. Communication

Error correction has always been a point of contention among language educators. Yet, I have learned through the years that, more often than not, students do expect some form of feedback when it comes to grammar use. Correction of sentence structures gains more acceptance and understanding for students, whether for their oral or written work, when preceded and followed by the instructor validating students' relevant thinking and semantic expression. As research has shown, communicating with students to tell them only what they did wrong, to underline their mistakes, will prove to be of little if any pedagogical value (Pawlak, 2013). There is much more to learning a new language than focusing on errors. If we want students to learn from their mistakes, we have to customize feedback to each individual student in such a way that there is:

1. an expectation from the student to have his/her mistakes corrected,
2. a willingness to learn from those mistakes, and, most importantly,
3. a strong validation of the student's positive accomplishments in other fields than the grammatical and syntactical ones, such as when expressing their original ideas, critical thinking and opinions, when showing a collaborative predisposition in activities with their peers, etc.

Failing to praise valuable content in student work and focusing on the poor points only, weakens the students' ability to learn and lessens their engagement and motivation for finishing the course, and/or pursuing higher levels in L2 proficiency.

In my communication with students concerning the writing of short compositions at the beginning level, I like to encourage students' expectations in relation to what extent they want their writing corrected, in other words, to how curious they are to learn better ways to communicate what they have stated, that is to express it clearly, concisely, and eventually using some idiomatic L2 expressions. For that purpose, I ask them to add a "Please Correct" note to their assignment. This note determines the difference between a short basic grading, and long-extended suggestions of better ways to communicate their ideas in L2 at length (Ha et al., 2021). As a matter of fact, some students might have no time or disposition to read extended comments, while others are eager to learn more and better ways to communicate their ideas in the target language. I have switched to this "Please Correct" note I ask students to add (or omit) after reading students' evaluations. Some complained of the length of the comments on their drafts, emphasizing their time-consuming nature. Others were thrilled by the possibilities, while happy and grateful about the same extended communications and options offered, thus appreciating the enriching nature of those linguistic variations. So, the lesson I learned as an instructor was to give each individual student the choice on the short -vs- long feedback they receive and also to enable students to decide on their choice on each single different assignment. Sometimes, even a student who usually likes to receive long feedback along with their grade might have several exams or projects due on a given week, so they would be free to opt out for that particular week. This flexibility works best for today's students as some of them are also working and/or parenting at the same time they are pursuing their degrees.

Positive communication is also key when using the language in class. One of my favorite techniques to correct F2F students' answers on the blackboard for a particular practice/activity is

to change the question of the exercise by making up a new question that is appropriate for the incorrect answer given by the student.

This becomes a deeper learning opportunity for all students while offering a tactful way to correct a mistake. After doing so, going back to the original question and giving the right answer to it, I find students understand it better. This is a win-win opportunity as the point they made is validated and at the same time the textbook or workbook author's point is validated as well.

This is another way to communicate in a positive fashion being that, at the same time, it creates a dynamic, enthusiastic environment in the classroom since the student who made the mistake on the board feels proud instead of ashamed or embarrassed.

3. Confidentiality

Another underlying factor that is important to student success whether online or F2F is a confidentiality disclosure set forth in the syllabus.

Confidentiality (Schmidt, 2004) is an important component in L2 student learning success, especially at the beginning level. Learning a language involves use and practice at its core, hence, confidentiality sets the tone to freely use and dare to practice the target language, putting aside the barriers of mispronunciation fears or the general L2 mistakes (Bashori et al., 2020) can generate. For example, students might ask themselves: How will the instructor handle mistakes? How will my peers react to my errors when I use the language in class? Such concerns might be a source of uneasiness in the L2 learner's mind, even as an unspoken fear or concern.

Fear of ridicule often constitutes a barrier to enunciation or early pronunciation. The fear of mispronouncing L2 words can be largely overcome when confidentiality is guaranteed to protect students from mockeries, outsiders' interferences, and even unpleasant negative comments. Once the fear factor is removed from the use and practice of the L2 being studied, the learning process

becomes effective and of academic relevance. So, I found it to be very helpful to reassure students that what is being said, pronounced, shared in the classroom stays within the classroom, whether F2F or online, so that everyone can share candidly and with confidence. Just as in the printed syllabus, I include the following confidentiality disclosure in my online syllabus: *The communication that takes place within this online classroom should stay within it. Please take the opportunity to use the Discussion Forum Café Cybernétique Introductions to get to know each other better. Like any class, we are a community, and we need to treat each other with respect.*

Moreover, in order to stress the importance of respect and discretion, I also have an introductory quiz online titled "Syllabus Agreement", which stands in lieu of students' signatures in print, which they have to closely read and then agree to all terms. In this way, all students alike are guaranteed a safe environment in which to use the target language unperturbed and worry-free.

4. Confidence

As fear factors are removed, the more motivated and engaged students become, and the more they tend to express themselves confidently and creatively. This leads in turn to the student's desire to pursue more advanced levels of L2 learning, while it also instills in them a much-needed confidence often expressed through a sense of humor (Neff et al., 2022), laughing (healthy laughter) at their own mistakes (for example secretly telling themselves 'I know I am going to say this wrong, but I am going to say it anyway'). Most important, this gained sense of confidence will lead them to improve their proficiency and to more deeply engage in the L2 learning journey.

Once confidence has been established through confidentiality, through communication, through contextualization, and through the instructor's positive comments and encouragement, it is important to sustain this confidence by a meaningful curricular content. If there is no light at the end of the tunnel, it might be scary to go through it. Poor curriculum design can be both discouraging and disengaging in L2 students' learning. Students must also be confident that they are learning stimulating content that is both challenging and rewarding. Moreover, confidence also promotes creativity which, at the same time, drives students to continue learning and optimizing their skills.

Conclusion

Encouraging students' participation without sacrificing accuracy in L2, pointing out correct/incorrect structures while always validating, valuing, showing appreciation of the effort made for higher semantic and syntactic students' input when expressing critical thinking and opinions, is at the foundation of a communicative approach that sets a friendly tone, puts students at ease and encourages them all the more to share and participate, even in the case of the shyest, most timid language learners. These standards are at the core of best practices in teaching languages and a key factor of students' success that can be applied in an online or an F2F setting alike. These essential concepts, which have been decidedly rewarding for me as a professor at the college level, are key and important to keep in mind whether in the F2F or online environment in order to make the most of students' learning, optimize their abilities, and increase their motivation and their participation. Our students' continuous engagement and commitment to the basic four L2 objectives: Speaking, writing, listening, and reading, are encouraged and reinforced through the Four Cs: *Contextualizing* for fluid comprehension, *communicating* in a

positive fashion, *confidentiality* to boost self-assuredness, and a sense of *confidence* that leads to creativity. All four Cs combined connect and guide my teaching experience.

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