Perennial, Thorny Issues: Addressing Learners' Unfamiliarity with Concepts

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"What is a subsidy?" "What's an internship?" "A tariff, what is that?" As an instructor of French for American military students studying at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC), I have been asked these questions by the youngest learners in my class. These types of questions demonstrate that instruction cannot only focus on second language acquisition but must include knowledge of concepts as well. Defining terms or concepts that may be laden with socio-cultural or political value can put an instructor in a difficult position. Responding effectively requires intentionality, self-reflection, and some forethought. Instructors' responses can lead to an increased openness among students or to students' sealing off their vulnerabilities. True, lasting learning can only grow when learners recognize gaps in their knowledge, are willing to expose them, and are provided accurate content with which to fill these gaps. This instructor reflection highlights one such interaction that occurred in my classroom. I reflect on my decision to use English to explain one particularly thorny concept. From this interaction, I deduced several beliefs and principles when facing gaps in learners' knowledge. The reflection closes by underscoring that creating trusting relationships in the classroom is foundational for deep, lasting learning. Such learning exceeds the use of an additional language. To develop such relationships, instructors must dispassionately recognize students' knowledge gaps, but also identify their "funds of knowledge," and leverage them for student learning.

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INTRODUCTION

During a recent lesson in my French class, we discussed an African film festival. I displayed a screenshot of some of the film's sponsors, whose logos provided additional input and realia for

students to examine. This prompted one student to state with some hesitation that, despite being in week 31 of a 36-week program, he did not have a clear understanding of the differences between the United Nations, the European Union, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. All three are international bodies with very different goals, which he had never previously untangled. Looking around the room, it was clear that his confusion was shared by others. I asked if it would be worth discussing for a few minutes, despite being only tangentially related to the lesson's topic on African cinema.

In three minutes, I explained each using maps I pulled up on the internet; I remained in the target language. Afterwards, two students thanked me, aloud and in French, for having made this detour. We returned to African cinema.

This learning event was, from my perspective, rather simple to address, but it is not always the case. This reflection highlights the complexities of first uncovering gaps in learners' knowledge and then filling them in ways that support DLIFLC's mission, while remaining respectful of students' diverse opinions.

UNCOVERING KNOWLEDGE GAPS

As mentioned above, I credit the learners who signal their unfamiliarity: doing so takes bravery. Such admissions may not occur in a classroom that learners perceive as unwelcoming of such admissions—either on the part of their instructor or their peers. However, the term "safe space," although trite, has merit. If learners do not feel "safe," able to admit their unfamiliarity without negative repercussions or mockery, their knowledge gap will persist in both English and the target language. Creating an atmosphere conducive to students' admissions requires a serious amount of observation, self-reflection, and trial-and-error on the part of instructors.

Once this knowledge gap has been laid bare in the classroom, the way that the instructor responds is of critical importance. The following example, a learning episode from my French class teaching intermediate students, illustrates the complexities inherent in addressing learners' unfamiliarity with concepts whose definitions may prove polemical.

DURING ONE LESSON...

The following is a gist of an exchange that unfolded between me and two students in French and then in English. It occurred while reading an authentic text, when I perceived that some students were unclear about the meaning of a passage.

Teacher : "*Est-ce que vous savez ce que c'est qu'un syndicat?* (Do you know what a labor union is?)"

18-year old learner: "*Est-ce que c'est comme* un "crime syndicate"? (Is it like a crime syndicate?)"

32-year-old learner: "Oui, c'est essentiellement la même chose. (Yeah, it's pretty much the same thing.)"

Teacher: "It means 'a labor union'."

18-year-old: "Umm…what's that?"

Teacher: "A labor union is like our teachers' union here at the DLI…"

(explanation continued…)

From this exchange, several important points surfaced. Before highlighting them, I want to explicate my perceptions of each student's speech. First, I understood the 18-year old to be sincere in asking the question, having presumably been exposed to this inexact cognate (*syndicat*/ syndicate) in English via crime television shows or contemporary political discourse. Secondly, I understood the 32-year old's statement to be overtly political in nature, according to some comments made previously in class. That said, I affirm that holding and expressing political opinions is the birthright of every American. As three Americans, both learners and I have the right to view and define any term however we like. No learner is required to hold my definition of this or any other concept.

ADDRESSING THIS GAP IN THIS STUDENT'S CONCEPTUAL KNOWLEDGE

Understanding the French word "*syndicat*" is critical to understanding contemporary Francophone culture. It is my job to prepare students for communication with and in Francophone societies. Allowing such a valuable learning event to pass by without seizing it would be, in my view, a dereliction of my responsibility.

For an English learner to understand *"syndicat"* pre-supposes knowledge of a "labor union" as an entity. My student's unfamiliarity with the word was a mask for his unfamiliarity with the entity, or the concept of a labor union. This demonstrates students' need for knowledge of concepts as a necessary component of their second language acquisition.

Different scholars would likely view such a learning event through different lenses. Some may understand it as an example of the development of my student's Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). By CALP, I mean the use of "advanced and complex language necessary for success in academic endeavors… (which) might be compounded by the fact that (they) may not have learned these concepts in their first language" (Iris Center, 2025, n.p.).

Through this lens, learners can develop their CALP in the second language (L2) simultaneously with developing it in their first language (L1), despite difficulties. The instructor's role, therefore, is not limited to facilitating students' L2 but also their L1. Yet it goes without saying that differences between L2 and L1 acquisition are manifest (Ipek, 2009).

Through a different lens, this learning event illustrates a student gaining knowledge of a concept rather than merely learning a term. Indeed, a discussion of what construes "knowing" and "learning" risks plunging this conversation into Derrida and Wittgenstein's philosophies of language, or even into metaphysics. To avoid this, it suffices to differentiate between knowledge of a word's meaning and knowledge of the word's *référant*, the thing that the word signifies.

Instructors are already comfortable with such precision, accepting that linguistic competence (knowledge of a language) and linguistic performance (ability to utilize a language) are distinct skills (Elaves, 2023). In the same way, knowledge of words and knowledge of concepts are also distinct. According to one group of translation scholars, "Concepts provide the necessary background for broad understanding, while terminologies ensure precision in discussions" (Hassabo et al., 2024, p. 117).

Upon sustained reflection on this learning episode, I believe that my student lacked conceptual knowledge rather than linguistic knowledge. An interpretation of his need as being one of mere academic language in his L1 learning is not reflective of the depth of the learning needed.

While this learning event seemed uniquely political, my students inquired with some regularity about socio-cultural concepts. I appreciate that students feel comfortable raising them. Such inquiries included questions about the "patriarchy," "internship," and "subsidy," among others.

MY (ENGLISH) RESPONSE

Recognizing "labor union" to be fraught, I chose to give my own explanation and to do so in English. My decision aligns with DLIFLC Command Policy, which permits the judicious use of English. It also remained compliant with the professional standard, put forward by ACTFL, that urges instructors to remain in the L2 for 90% of class time (ACTFL, 2025). Researchers of input-processing within cognitive linguistics concluded that when "input is largely incomprehensible, a learner is less likely to infer the meaning of a new word as compared to input that is completely comprehensible" (Barcroft, 2024, p. 24–25). Consequently, vocabulary instruction should be done both explicitly (providing English equivalents) and incidentally (without English, when learners deduce meaning) (Barcroft, 2012).

Within DLIFLC, Bikowski and Zhu (2024) posited that, "All would agree that no amount of target language input will help students learn if it is not comprehensible to them" (p. 14). Here, what was incomprehensible was the concept, rather than the language. I could have explained the concept in the L2 but did not. Guidance issued for New York classrooms asks instructors considering using the L1 to first ask themselves, "Will learning (the L2) and content matter be better supported by using the L1 with the L2 for a given task?" (Billings & Walqui, 2021, n.p.). I believed, and continue to believe, that providing students with an unambiguous explanation of this (demonstrably) polemical concept justified the use of L1 in the L2 classroom. Teachers often feel guilty for using L1 in the L2 classroom (Billings & Walqui, 2021), but in the case of this particular learning event, I do not.

There was an infinite number of ways that, as the instructor, I could have responded. Each possibility meanders through a unique set of landmines. Any response an instructor issues will be perceived as meaningful, but will be interpreted in disparate, unpredictable ways. Finally, I acknowledge that, as a sentient human being, my subjectivities inform my reaction, as do my perceptions of what is important within Francophone societies. If I viewed the unfamiliar term as not critical to Francophone people, nor to my values, I would have reacted differently. Ultimately, my response did not stray from the DLIFLC's primary mission or command policies.

WHAT I SUCCESSFULLY AVOIDED

Language, the grammar and lexicon that speakers choose to use—or not use—is loaded with meaning. Unbiased definitions may not exist. A decade ago, I remember being shocked at the intense debates over the language that journalists use when reporting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: even the word "action" was deemed partisan (McKenzie, 2013). All words carry residue of other words, from previous usages or concurrent collocations.

Using English, my own L1, I circumvented strong feelings evoked by this concept. Instructors know that no learning event is ever perfect, yet I am not dissatisfied with how this conversation unfolded. At the time of this writing, both students continue to be engaged in their learning in my classroom, and the younger continues to ask concept questions regularly. This suggests that I navigated this event reasonably well, in my view.

In taking control of this learning event, in English, I successfully avoided the worst possible outcomes. Among them are an open-class discussion in which students offered their various perspectives and interpretations of the unfamiliar concept. When filling a gap in students' knowledge (like the one aforementioned), such discussions are problematic for multiple reasons. They inevitably consume precious class time and detract from the lesson's goals. They present the instructor with the challenge of selecting which student(s) get to speak and which opinion(s) are prioritized. They risk losing the learner in a maze of opinion, providing an ambiguous understanding of the concept. Worse, such discussions would center on American perspectives of the concept, rather than target-culture perspectives. And in worst-case scenarios, political divides become apparent in the classroom, harming the cohesiveness of the class and potentially undermining learners' trust in their instructor.

Remembering that the mission of the DLIFLC is language and cultural acquisition of the target culture, solicitations of DLIFLC (American) students' perspectives on phenomena within American culture seem off-mission. In this example, it is irrelevant how students perceive U.S. labor unions when learning about labor unions in Francophone Africa. Nor are the instructor's perspectives of U.S. labor unions at all relevant. Instead, I believe that when knowledge gaps surface, it is my role to ensure that students possess a solid, neutral (as possible) understanding (i.e., denotation) of the unfamiliar concept. This work should not be relegated to students, particularly when dealing with fraught or sensitive concepts.

REFLECTIONS ON THE THORNINESS OF TEACHING

Upon reflecting on such learning events, I identified several beliefs and principles embedded in my teaching approach when encountering gaps in learners' knowledge of concepts.

1: Learners who lack an extensive conceptual repertoire of concepts are neither unintelligent nor merit blame.

Quite the contrary! Studying intensively and for an extended time period at DLIFLC requires an array of skills and competencies. Yet as a 40-year-old, I have lived twice as long as my one 19-year-old learner, who lovingly pointed this out. Consequently, it is inevitable that my knowledge base is exponentially broader, just as my former 61-year-old learner (yes, at DLIFLC) possessed magnitudes more life experience than I— as a father, warfighter, husband, and missionary. These are realities we must accept, with humility (emphasis added).

What's more, education is the result of individual learners' efforts. Yet education is equally a reflection of learners' communities (city, state, country) valuation and prioritization. Across the 50 states and five U.S. territories, education varies drastically. Funding, facilities, and curriculum are not homogeneous or equitable. Instructors must be aware of such disparities to understand their learners.

2: No one is entirely free from ideologies.

By ideology, I mean "the body of doctrine, myth, belief, etc., that guides an individual, social movement, institution, class, or large group" (Dictionary.com, 2025). This includes linguistic ideologies, which are implicitly or explicitly held beliefs on, "not only how language is, but how it ought to be" (Woolard, 2020, n.p.). Cognizant of this, the prudent instructor who is focused on the mission of language education would avoid imparting their own ideologies onto their students. Pragmatically, they would recognize the quagmires that certain concepts may pose to a group of contemporary Americans. To effectively navigate them, instructors should consult external resources when elucidating concepts (e.g., "unions"), when learners lack denotations. The path around quagmires is far more perilous when students lack a term's connotation.

3: Admittedly, politics touches our lives and our jobs.

It does so intimately in the lives of federal workers. As such, avoiding discussing it proves challenging. There is a real risk that allowing discussion of (U.S.) politics in the classroom may derail the lesson, lead to perceptions of bias/partisanship, and irreparably change learners' perceptions of instructors and instruction. Discussing global affairs, even historical ones, can be tricky. Given the U.S.'s global footprint, it seems almost impossible to read foreign news sources that do not reference decisions being made in the U.S. Inviting discussions of U.S. actions abroad into the language classroom is the proverbial camel poking its nose into the tent—very soon the rest of the camel will be inside.

CONCLUSION

Teaching is a complex, human activity. I am reminded of this fact when encountering gaps in learners' knowledge of concepts, which occur with some regularity. I am also reminded of this when navigating comments made in the classroom. Teaching within the U.S. is even more complex given our culture and laws that respect all Americans' First Amendment rights. Maintaining alignment between the mission (particularly enhancing students' understanding of the operational environment), learning outcomes, and a balanced perspective is key.

It may be frustrating that some students do not know concepts that we expect. If instructors in fact, "meet learners where they are," they must identify their learners' strengths and knowledge gaps, and expertly find ways to bridge the two. Following the DLIFLC policy and professional standards, the prudent use of English to scaffold within lessons should not be dismissed *a priori*. Regarding strategic L1 use, "the key for teachers is to consider those instructional moments in which action or communication is essential" (Billings & Walqui, 2021, n.p.). When doing so, they should remain mindful of their students' progress through the program.

Instructors must remember the primary mission of the Institute: second language acquisition and cultural capabilities. Any conversation that diverts from this goal is no longer supporting the mission. As such, teachers must at times steer students away from egregious detours. At the same time, students possess a treasure-trove of cultural knowledge—about their own culture(s) through their own lives and experiences. Instructors must recognize learners' assets, knowledge, interests, and various life experiences, known in the scholarship as "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992). Excellent instructors will create pathways from them leading into the L2 culture(s).

Teaching, like all complicated human activities, should involve assessment, reflection, recalibration, and re-application. Ultimately, faculty have an opportunity to shape students' lives, far beyond teaching them a language. This is particularly true of our youngest learners. Faculty must remain aware of this, even if it can easily elude us.

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