

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR A F.L. TEACHER APPLICANT

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These are the interview questions that I would ask applicants for a foreign language teaching job. I have also added answers that I would like to hear from candidates. Hopefully these interview questions will give teachers and administrators some direction and spark the generation of further questions.

Many of these questions attempt to discover the approach or philosophy of teaching of the job applicant, rather than just methods or techniques, so the initial questions focus more on strategies than on specific tactics. The national standards defined by the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and recent Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research both favor comprehensible input rather than teach-the-rule-and-drill-it approaches that were used years ago. The difference between these two approaches is often described as **Language Acquisition** (based on comprehensible input and meaningful discourse) versus **Language Learning** (based on long grammatical explanations and form-based, non-communicative drills)

1. What role does grammar correction play in your classroom?

Most students take a foreign language class because they want to be able to speak the language. Acquiring another language can be a daunting task and that desire can be squelched if grammar is constantly corrected. Instead, I focus on comprehensible input-based methods. Correct grammar is important, but correcting students' grammatical mistakes interrupts meaning and the flow of language and therefore interrupts the acquisition process.

A good answer might also have references and/or reasoning like this:

The research indicates that grammar rule teaching tends to be a short term memory item. Moreover, the gains from explicit grammar teaching are meager and they usually show up only on a grammar test. The gains in fluent speaking are thought to come from another kind of learning known as acquisition. There are some extremely gifted individuals who can remember grammatical rules and apply them in the middle of a conversation, but for most people to be successful in applying a grammatical rule, these conditions have to be met:

- 1) They must understand clearly how to apply the rule*
- 2) They must be focused on using the form correctly*
- 3) They must have time to apply it*

These three conditions are rarely met in everyday speech. They tend to only occur on a discrete point grammar test, and they only are remembered for a short time. Most people speak best by saying what "sounds right" to them. This feeling of correctness about the language only comes by repeatedly hearing and/or reading understandable messages in the language. This is what we try to do in class; set up conditions where students can understand progressively more complex messages in a relaxed environment.

From The Natural Approach, p. 30, by Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell

2. What is your opinion about grammatical accuracy vs. fluency?

An answer weighted towards fluency shows that the applicant understands current issues in the field:

“We need both, but picking up practical grammar that students can use as they speak does not come from an obsessive focus on grammar. Using correct grammar is important in that it helps to make communication clear, but most grammar usage is acquired and expressed unconsciously. Fluency trumps a focus on grammar. Hearing contextualized, meaningful language is how students become fluent according to language acquisition research over the last 30 years. If there is enough input in the language by listening and reading, students will develop a sense of what is right usage.

When a teacher focuses on form in teaching, it leads to students that focus on form when they speak. This makes them use the language less and they have less contact with speakers of the language. The result is lower language use and less acquisition outside of the classroom.”

A citation like the following, which shows the candidate understands the inherent tension between focusing on form and focusing on communication, would also be nice to hear:

“The major... had complimented me on how I spoke Italian, and we talked together very easily. One day I had said that Italian seemed like such an easy language to me that I could not take a great interest in it; everything was so easy to say. ‘Ah yes,’ the major said, ‘Why then, do you not take up the use of grammar?’ So we took up the use of grammar, and soon Italian was such a difficult language that I was afraid to talk to him until I had the grammar straight in my mind.”

Ernest Hemmingway, Men without Women, p. 46-47

3. On what research or model do you base your teaching methods?

Answers will vary here, but we need staff members that are clear on what we are trying to accomplish in our language classes. We do not need teachers that are so bogged down in techniques and methods that they lose sight of the overall approach.

*References to “**Comprehensible Input**” are best because they are backed by research rather than inertia. Much of the research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory for the last 30 years has been based on the work of Dr. Stephen Krashen of USC, which indicates that people learn language through Comprehensible Input. This kind of input happens in the classroom by emphasizing speaking with the students in the target language and by reading. Methods like Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS) mesh well with this approach, but Comprehensible Input is the big idea.*

4. Describe a typical day in your classroom

Here is a good answer that meshes with the standards:

“The core each class is spoken language, so the bulk of class time is reserved for auditory comprehensible input—interesting, contextualized Spanish so that the students can understand. Interaction with the teacher and with one another in the language is what you will see almost every day.”

It would also be nice if the applicant were aware of the 2010 ACTFL position statement regarding the use of the target language in the classroom, with a statement like this:

“Students cannot acquire a language unless they hear it and negotiate meaning by interacting with real people. Most of the class time should be filled with understandable target language by both teacher and students. ACTFL recommends at

least 90% target language use at all levels. English should be used only minimally, even in levels I and II. Nearly exclusive target language in levels 3-AP is a given.”

Reading is also a part of almost every class—even in Spanish I. In every lesson I incorporate the four language skills of speaking, listening, reading, writing, and culture, as well as the New (2009) Colorado Standards for Foreign Language, which correspond to the national standards defined by the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL): Communication, Cultures, Connections and Comparisons.

5. How did you learn another language?

A good answer might be something like this:

“In high school and at college, along with an extensive stay in a foreign country”

We want native-like fluency, but natives do not always have the awareness of modern SLA theory, the ACTFL standards, or the empathy to deal with new language learners. Native speakers can be valuable teachers, but they should be questioned thoroughly to be sure that they do not adhere to a grammatical approach, which is commonly used in many countries in Latin America—this is changing quickly in Asia now, but it has not generally been picked up in the Americas or in Europe yet.

“I grew up in a bilingual home”, I lived abroad”, “I studied abroad” and “I still travel frequently” are also good answers.

“I am still learning every day” is a great answer—self-aware and humble.

6. How do you maintain and increase your own language proficiency?

A good answer might look like this:

“I maintain it by speaking the language daily and by reading, also by corresponding with family and friends in other countries, and by watching movies and television in the language. Speaking the target language all day long every day in class also helps.”

7. Should students with learning disabilities be included in world language classes?

About the only acceptable answer will be something like this one:

“Yes, definitely. If it is taught properly, with input-based methods and frequent comprehension checks, almost anyone can learn a foreign language. Students with learning disabilities can have dramatic results in an acquisition-based language class, because language acquisition is more acoustical than intellectual. I have seen these students have a lot of success in language classes. They bring a lot to a class and I consider them assets rather than liabilities.”

8. How do you include students with disabilities in your classroom?

Specific accommodations for foreign language are what we are looking for:

“I look at the students’ IEP’s and accommodate where needed. I run an interactive classroom, so I frequently ask for responses and I look into their eyes to see if they really understand what I am saying.

I observe their behavior carefully and differentiate my instruction to effectively reach them.

I give them preferential seating, like in the front of the class, if they need it. I explain directions slowly, clearly and in different ways. I do frequent comprehension checks. I also give them more time with assignments if they need it. Many of these techniques are just plain good teaching practice that I do with all students.”

9. How do you accommodate the various learning styles of students within a class?
Specific techniques for oral language are valuable here. Something like:

“I use different techniques to give comprehensible input to students with visual, auditory and kinesthetic learning styles such as gestures, acting, role playing and drawing, as well as reading. As I get to know them, I begin to develop different expectations from different students based on their ability. We can talk about the same material and all can contribute, but at different levels. This can be handled with differing degrees of oral questioning ranging from simple yes/no questions to conjectural “why?” questions.”

THIS SECTION CONTAINS GENERAL QUESTIONS THAT APPLY TO ANY SUBJECT AND SUITABLE ANSWERS WILL VARY. SAMPLE ANSWERS ARE INCLUDED AS IDEA GENERATORS.

10. Describe your preferred system of classroom management.

Answers referring to proactive methods are good:

“I am pro-active in my classroom management style and I try to head off problems before they begin. When I am involved with students by engaging them personally in the classroom and showing them that I care, I find that there are fewer problems to begin with.”

I would also like to hear:

“I use some of the ideas from the book Tools for Teaching by Fred Jones to use peer pressure, body language, redirection, choices, de-escalation and rewards to direct classroom behavior.”

11. What inspired you become a teacher?

I love the language. I have connections with the language. My family also took many vacations to Mexico as I was growing up. I took Spanish in high school and I loved the language but the Spanish program was weak. After three years of taking Spanish in high school, even though I got good grades, I couldn’t really speak the language. I wanted to try to see if I could find a better way to teach kids Spanish than what I experienced.

12. What do you like about our school?

The staff, the students, the positive environment, the community involvement.

13. What are some of your strengths and weaknesses?

14. Was there one person that steered you into teaching?

It was a combination of people in my life.

15. Where do you see yourself in five years?

Working at a quality school, teaching in a program that is developing students that can speak the language at a high level.

Other questions: