



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



Excerpt from the Odyssey activity manual *Semer, cultiver, récolter. Un guide à l'intention des monitrices et des moniteurs de langues d'Odysée* (2004)

1. What should I do if a student refuses to speak target language?

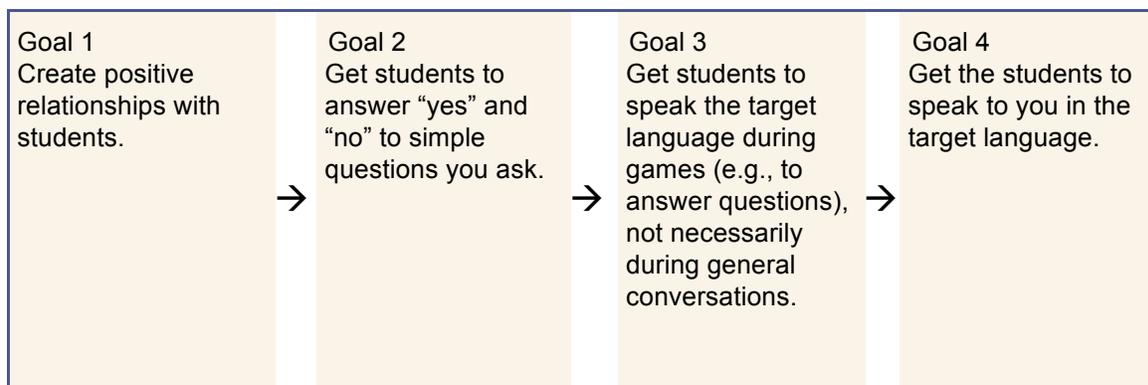
This is a situation you're very likely to encounter. At the start of the year, it's important to establish clear rules about using the target language in the classroom. You should tell students that your role is to help them learn the target language, and so you'll naturally expect them to speak it. It is a good idea to talk to members of the teaching staff in advance about your expectations and the consequences for not following the rules. Of course, you'll need to remind students about these rules throughout the year, and about the consequences of not following them.

If you find this question applies to you, it goes to show the importance of your role in helping students learn the language. And given the diversity of students' skill levels, you may have to adapt your objectives accordingly. You'll have different expectations for students who need coaxing to speak the target language than for those to whom it comes easily.

If some students are reticent to speak the target language, the most important thing for you to do is try to build a positive relationship with them. They might continue to speak their own language, but you should be patient and continue in the target language. As the saying goes, slowly but surely wins the race. Once you've formed closer relationships with your students, you'll find you have more influence with them. That might not happen until midway through the year—don't worry and keep using as much positive reinforcement as possible. **These students will need more of it.** It's very likely that they feel intimidated.

Here's a good analogy: Say you're helping athletes learn the high jump. If you put the bar too high on the first jump, they'll give up right away. But if you put the bar at an easily accessible height, they won't hesitate to jump. After that, you just keep raising the bar as the athletes gain more confidence. In your classroom, if you end the year with a higher "bar" than you started with, you'll have achieved your goal. But keep in mind that the impact of your work might not be felt until after you leave. The relationships that you build might be more powerful than you realize. At the end of the day, don't aim for perfection; keep building on the progress you make.

Here's an example of changing goals based on progress:



It's possible that you may only achieve two goals with some students.

Note:

Positive reinforcement goes a long way. It's always possible to find something good to say about a student. If you think you have a student with serious difficulties, see the next question.

2. One of the students in my classroom has serious behavioural issues. I can't get them to do any of the activities I've prepared. What should I do?

First and foremost, it's important to remember that you're not a remedial teacher or a counsellor. You're not formally trained to help students with serious behavioural issues.

Make sure you've clearly communicated your rules. With some classrooms, you'll need to set very firm parameters. Some groups also have difficulty with transitions. Just changing rooms can cause some people to lose control. That's why it's best to plan routine, structured activities to avoid losing time. It's also a good idea to work with the teacher to determine what the consequences should be for certain behaviours. And of course, follow-up is key.

If you have a student with serious behavioural issues, you're probably not the first one to notice. Don't hesitate to talk to other people who work with the student. If it's an attention deficit issue, the classroom teacher and remedial teacher will be able to give you some strategies.

If the problem persists, talk to the classroom teacher and, if they agree, remove the student from the activities. But no matter what you do, don't try to deal with the issue on your own.

3. What if there's a teacher who's always asking me to make photocopies?

When you begin your assignment, it's a good idea to meet with the teachers you'll be working with to discuss what your role will be and what your duties will look like. If you're the first language assistant the school has ever had, hand out the job description you got in your documentation package. Tell your teachers that if they have any questions or concerns about your work, they should talk to you about it. That way, it will be easier to do the same with them if you need to.

If you have a teacher who still doesn't get it, try talking to them using "I" statements. For example, "I'd like to talk to you about a small problem I'm having. **I feel** a little bit uncomfortable, because I don't want to give you the impression that I don't want to help out. It's about when you ask me to make photocopies. **I really don't mind** helping you out from time to time, since I know how busy you often are. But I don't think photocopying is part of the language assistant's job. If I spend too much time making photocopies, that means I have less time for the students. **I feel like I'm in a difficult position:** I have so many ideas for activities, but I don't have enough time to work on them."

4. What should I do if I have a conflict with a teacher I work with?

It's normal to have minor conflicts with coworkers. Just because you work in the same place with someone doesn't mean you see things the same way or take the same approach to your work. In most cases, clear communication is the key to solving problems. But if the situation gets worse after you've tried multiple times to talk to the other person about finding a solution, bring the issue to your principal confidentially. Don't jump the gun and ask for a reassignment; instead, ask the principal to help you resolve the problem. If this approach doesn't work, talk to your local coordinator or supervisor. They should listen to you and help you find a solution. But your first step should always be to address the issue with the teacher in question using "I" statements.

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5. Am I allowed to have an after-hours job?

Yes, you can have an after-hours job, so long as it doesn't affect your job as language assistant. For example, you could do evening tutoring sessions for students or adults in the community. That would be a good fit with your role as a cultural and language ambassador and help you integrate into the community. Just make sure you don't overwork yourself!

6. There are two students in my class who are constantly arguing and always end up fighting. But I never know which one started it. What should I do?

Talk to the teacher. This kind of situation is their responsibility.

7. The activities I prepare are too easy for some students and too hard for others. There's a big difference in skill levels. What should I do?

In this kind of situation, you need to be flexible and adjust your plans and expectations accordingly. For example, let's say you're improvising with a group that has a student who's new to the target audience. Give them the option of joining the activity in stages, starting them out with a key role that doesn't require as much language skill. In an improv activity, that might be scorekeeper, referee, etc. Gradually work up to having them join a team, making sure to include miming improv games for them.

If it's a game where each student needs to give an improvised speech on a category or theme, make sure there's a variety of skill levels in the vocabulary. Count the number of words they use and award one point per word. Give more points to beginners for the words they use.

For students with difficulties, you'll need to make sure your activities are very well structured. It's very important for these students to have models, language structures, etc. Give them as many examples as possible. They'll need more tools than other students. It can sometimes be a good idea to pair a lower-level student with a more advanced student. Just make sure you're not making things too easy for the advanced student. You only want to simplify things for those who need it.

As you can see, a little bit of flexibility can help make things work for everyone!

8. A student told me that they're being physically abused at home. They made me promise I wouldn't tell. I don't want to lose their trust. What should I do?

Yes, this student trusted you and confided in you. Even though you promised to keep their secret, they very clearly need help and protection. As an adult, you have a legal obligation to report what you know in order to help the student. There's a way to do it confidentially, without damaging your relationship with the student.

Under provincial and territorial laws, if an adult has information that leads them to believe a student is being abused, that adult must immediately report it to the authorities. If you have reason to believe a student is being abused, you should start by informing the teacher and principal; they'll know what to do next.

9. I work in a small school with only five or six students per class, and most of my activities were designed with bigger schools in mind. What should I do?

It's true that there are activities that work better with bigger groups than smaller groups. And vice-versa! The activities in this guide have been designed to be easily adaptable. If you work in a small school, you should opt for projects, questionnaires, pair activities, interviews, school radio, board games, etc. Avoid activities that require a large group dynamic, unless you're able to bring two or three classes together. Choose role playing activities that are easy to do in small settings. You'll quickly see the advantages of working in a smaller school.

10. What should I do if a student makes a complaint about me, or says that I hit them, for example?

The language assistant who submitted this question added the following: "Luckily, everything turned out okay. I spoke to my principal right away and they were able to follow up on it immediately. We found out that the student had been telling lies to get the attention of their parents and friends. It wasn't a fun experience, but because I brought it up right away, it saved me a lot of trouble in the end. I hope this mishap can help people see the importance of communication between colleagues."

The language assistant's remarks say it all. And remember that it's better to be safe than sorry. Don't put yourself in a situation where you're alone with a student behind closed doors or in a car, etc. Don't let students visit you at home.

11. Are there ways to encourage students to speak the target audience without always giving them rewards (candy, stickers, fun erasers, etc.)?

Positive reinforcement is an important tool in the language assistant's toolkit. Instant-gratification methods can help, but they tend to reinforce external motivation rather than self-motivation. Of course, it can be tempting to use these kinds of rewards, since they yield more visible results than positive reinforcement, which is what promotes self-motivation. Save the toys and candy for special occasions.

Try to create a fun environment to encourage students to speak the target audience. Just doing different activities than they normally do in their other classes can help to create a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. Building good relationships with your students can also be a good source of motivation for them.

Congratulate your students on their progress, even for small things. It might sometimes feel like you're saying nothing all day but "Good work, Jane, way to join in! It's great that you're participating!" You might also consider being funny or dramatic in your reactions: "You used a phrasal verb! Oh, how beautiful, I love the sound of a good phrasal verb. Do it again!"

You can also praise your students' progress in front of the teacher. From time to time, reward the entire class by letting them play their favourite game. Keep varying the methods you use to congratulate your students; this helps to reinforce good behaviours even more.

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Ultimately, your goal is to create a fun atmosphere—that’s the real reward for your students. If you put in the effort to lay a solid groundwork at the start of the year, you’ll see great results at the end. And they may even last until after you’re gone!

12. What should I do if I feel like I’m being put in charge of helping a struggling student, especially since I know there’s a lack of resource staff at my school?

First and foremost, remember that you’re not a teacher (remedial or otherwise) or support staff member. And you’re right to have concerns about this situation. Of course, you want to be a team player and help out as much as possible. Your role could be to provide support, motivation, etc. However, you shouldn’t agree to assume responsibility for a struggling student. You’re not trained for that role. It’s possible that your supervisor doesn’t understand your role. Try to meet with them to talk about your concerns, making sure to use “I” statements: “I feel this task is too much for me, since I don’t have the proper training, and I’m afraid I won’t be able to give the student the tools they need. Can we look at my job description together?” (See the job description below.) It might be a good idea to offer to help out with other tasks to show the supervisor that you’re coming to them in good faith.

Job description

Language assistants are not teachers or instructors. You are not allowed to do any tasks that are restricted to teaching staff, such as:

- Supervising students without a teacher or instructor present, whether inside or outside the classroom
- Disciplining students
- Supporting students with behavioural issues
- Marking homework
- Preparing report cards

Under the supervision of a teacher, the language assistant’s primary role is to help students learn one of the official languages. Their focus should mainly be on oral communication, which means their job is to create situations where students can practise their language skills.

Language assistants help students improve their language skills in conversational situations, in both formal and informal settings. They also help students learn about cultural aspects of the language, by sharing personal experiences with them.

Under teacher supervision, language assistants prepare and lead activities for students. Teachers provide guidance in helping them choose activities, which they may develop themselves from time to time, and help them come up with new ideas. Language assistants can also help teaching staff prepare extracurricular activities, like concerts, festivals, and sports events.

Language assistants can lead activities in the classroom, with the teacher; or they can work with a small group of students in a separate room.

(Excerpt translated from the *Administrative and Financial Guide*)

13. When I arrived, I thought I'd get support from teachers to introduce new activities. But I'm encountering some obstacles, and I get the feeling my teachers don't want to try new things. I'm discouraged. What should I do?

As the saying goes, Rome wasn't built in a day. Don't expect to arrive in your new environment and take charge of everything right away. Your energy and enthusiasm are an essential part of your role as language assistant, but it's not always easy for other people to accept change. Imagine that you've been playing basketball with the same group of friends for years, and one day someone new joins the group. They're friendly enough, but right away they want to start introducing new rules and changing how you play. Even if they're good ideas, you might feel a bit put out.

Start by working as much as possible with anyone who's interested in trying new things. Ask them how you should go about pitching your ideas. Would it be better to bring them up at a staff meeting? One on one with a particular teacher? With the principal?

People who are hesitant to try new things often need to see evidence that something works before they'll agree to it. Start with a few activities that are "sure bets" that might help you win the trust of your teachers and students. In your first few weeks, choose activities that don't require too much time from the teacher. Little by little, you'll earn their trust, and it will be easier for you to pitch new activities.

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