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Optimizing Student Success: Focused Curriculum, Meaningful Assessment, and Effective Instruction

Aleidine J. Moeller

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One of the greatest challenges facing foreign language teachers is the pressure to ‘cover the curriculum.’ Jeff Golub (1993) noted “when one must cover items—and usually there are far too many items in the curriculum anyway to be covered adequately—one tends to focus on teaching content instead of teaching students” (p. 3).

Classroom teaching has often focused too narrowly on the memorization of information in a setting that resembles what Freire dubs the “banking model,” depositing knowledge without regard for the individual background knowledge and experiences. Language standards have broadened our sense of what we teach and why. These standards promote three purposes for learning a language: to communicate interpersonally, to interpret, or to present information and ideas. Individual state standards delineate performance outcomes, what students should be able to do (e.g. write a personal communication such as, a note, letter, or invitation) at various levels of language learning. These standards guide our choices of what to teach, but the curriculum must still be adapted to meet the age, needs, and interests of the students in our classrooms.

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As a result of standards, the concepts of curriculum and assessment have changed. Traditionally scope and sequence were provided and “standardized” tests were administered at the end of a unit of instruction. A list of grammar and vocabulary were assigned, taught, and “covered.” With the advent of standards, students were asked to use these structures and vocabulary in authentic contexts and situations. The question for the teacher was no longer, what do I need to cover, but rather, how can my students demonstrate successful use and knowledge of the target language and culture? What assessment will demonstrate that students have reached the standard? The lines between curriculum, assessment, and instruction have become blurred

and almost indistinguishable.

Curriculum and the Teacher

The curriculum serves as a means to an end; it is a detailed plan with identified lessons in an appropriate form and sequence that directs teaching. It specifies the activities, assignments, and assessments to be used in achieving its goals: what the learner will know and do. A teacher focuses on a topic (e.g. table etiquette), uses a specific resource (e.g. video, simulation), and chooses specific instructional methods (cooperative groups to analyze similarities and differences in table etiquette) to cause learning to meet a given standard (e.g. the student demonstrates understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons of cultures studied and their own, Standard 4.2). Standards are not prescriptions for particular curricular or instructional approaches, but rather are meant to support teachers instead of dictating to teachers what and how they should teach. Teachers are placed in the role of decision-making professionals. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction has produced *Planning Curriculum for Learning World Languages* (2002) designed to help educators develop curriculum for learning languages. This resource provides step-by-step decisions necessary for designing a curriculum for learning languages.

An interactive curriculum depends on a teacher's knowing how students are reacting to instruction, what they wish to learn more about, what research the teacher needs to conduct, and what tools are needed to optimize learning. A blending of student interests and needs with the required curriculum necessitates continual assessment that informs instruction.

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Traditionally, what we teach is prescribed by the state, the school district, or the publishing company. The textbook and often the exams are fixed, leaving little consideration for background knowledge and interests of students. However, as Elliot Eisner (1992) notes:

If teaching is weak or insensitive, whatever virtues the curriculum might possess will be for naught. The teacher is the prime mediator of life in the classroom and the quality of teaching ought to be a primary concern of school improvement . . . Our evaluation practices operationally define what really matters for students and teachers. If our evaluation practices do not reflect our most cherished values,

they will undermine the values we cherish (p. 5)

The important role of the teacher as “mediator of life in the classroom” (Eisner, 1992, p. 5) was supported in Sanders’ research that investigated student achievement data in the state of Tennessee and tied teacher quality to student achievement (Sanders & Horn, 1994; Wright, Horn & Sanders, 1997). As a result of analyzing the achievement scores of more than 100,000 students, they concluded “that the most important factor affecting student learning is the teacher” (1997, p. 63). By grouping teachers into quintiles based on their effectiveness in producing student learning gains, Sanders and Rivers (1998) examined the impact of teacher effectiveness on the learning of students ranging from low to high-achievers. On average, the least effective teachers produced gains of about 14 percentile points among low achieving students during the school year as opposed to the most effective teachers, who posed gains that averaged 53 percentile points.

A growing body of research is investigating what constitutes teacher effectiveness. Scholars have identified three qualities that impact student achievement: strong verbal and math skills, deep content knowledge, and teaching skills (Ferguson, 1997; Goldhaber & Brewer, 1996; Darling-Hammond, 1996). Goldhaber and Brewer (1996) found a significant positive relationship between teachers’ degrees and students’ achievement in technical subjects. They concluded that “in mathematics and science, it is the teacher subject-specific knowledge that is the important factor in determining tenth-grade achievement” (p. 199). Much like science and mathematics, foreign language is a technical skill requiring a deep understanding of the target culture and the ability to perform at a high level of communication in a variety of complex social and professional settings. Content expertise can be gained through extensive study and immersion in the target cultures. A second important quality, teaching skills, is acquired through teacher education, professional development, and experience in the classroom.

The “Ready to Teach Act of 2003, Teacher Quality Enhancement Grants, section 201” (H.R. 2211) defines “teaching skills” as those that:

- (A) are based on scientifically based research;
- (B) enable teachers to effectively convey and explain subject matter content;
- (C) lead to increased student achievement; and
- (D) use strategies that
 - (i) are specific to subject matter;
 - (ii) include ongoing assessment of student learning;
 - (iii) focus on identification and tailoring of academic instruction to student’s [sic] specific learning needs; and
 - (iv) focus on classroom management.

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards publication, *World*

Languages Other Than English Standards (2001), elaborates on these skills and offers prospective candidates an opportunity to reflect upon how they meet these foreign language standards and ways to address possible deficiencies.

Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment refers to a collection of data, information that enlightens the teacher and the learner, information that drives instruction. Good teachers assess constantly, they observe what is happening in their classroom, what Yetta Goodman (1978) dubs “kid watching.” They talk to students and pose questions about their learning. Good teachers assess and adjust their teaching based on their assessment and share assessments with their students, so students can adjust their performances to meet criteria and expectations. Ongoing assessment does much more than inform evaluation; one of assessment’s functions is to drive instruction.

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Assessment is an indicator of the extent to which the curricular goals are being met and have been achieved. It is a general term used to underscore the use of numerous methods to gather evidence to indicate that students are meeting standards. Forms of evidence include a variety of formal and informal assessments during a unit of study or a course, such as observations, simulations/skits, traditional quizzes and tests, and performance tasks and projects, as well as students’ self-assessments gathered over time. Using different types of assessments provides a richer and more comprehensive picture of student learning that allows students to have more than one way to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. Performance standards, or intended outcomes, refers to the desired impact of teaching and learning—what a student should know and be able to do and what standard should be used to signify understanding. Curriculum and instruction are the venue for achieving specific results. Content standards specify the input—what is the content that should be covered? Performance standards specify the desired output—what must the student do, and how well, to be judged successful?

The *ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners* (1998) provide a barometer for how well students should be performing at the novice, intermediate, and pre-advanced stages. These guidelines are grounded in the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* (National Standards, 1999) that define the K-12 foreign language curriculum according to modes of communication: interpersonal (face-to-face communication,

personal letters and e-mail), interpretive (one-way reading or listening), and presentational (one-way writing and speaking). Language descriptors are provided for comprehensibility, comprehension, language control, vocabulary, cultural awareness, and communication strategies in chart form according to levels of language (novice, intermediate, pre-advanced). Using these charts teachers can identify the descriptors their students can satisfactorily complete.

Wiggins (1993) defines learning and its measurement by pointing out that “understanding is not cued knowledge: performance is never the sum of drills; problems are not exercises; mastery is not achieved by the unthinking application of algorithms. In other words, we cannot be said to understand something unless we can employ our knowledge wisely, fluently, flexibly, and aptly in particular and diverse contexts” (p. 200). In their pivotal work, *Understanding by Design* (1998), Wiggins and McTighe use the term “understanding” to mean sophisticated insights and abilities, reflected in varied performances and contexts. Their text aims to guide teachers in designing lessons and assessments that anticipate, evoke and overcome the most likely student misconceptions and that engage learners in meaningful and authentic learning tasks that put the learner in a more active role as a constructor of meaning. Their perspective interfaces closely with Eisner (1992), who defines the deeper mission of schooling as “the stimulation of curiosity, the cultivation of the intellect, the refinement of sensibilities, the growth of imagination, and the desire to use these unique and special human potentialities” (p. 3).

Alternative assessment, a term popularized by Grant Wiggins (1989), is a broad term referring to any type of assessment that deviates from the traditional, behavioral, stimulus-response model characterized by one-answer, multiple-choice tests found on teacher-created tests and standardized tests. Authentic assessment refers to tasks that are real and meaningful to the learner in today’s world. Performance assessment, which may be authentic as well as alternative, refers to any type of assessment that provides opportunities for students to demonstrate what they know, putting what they have learned into a meaningful context and showing what they know. Portfolios are a natural way for students and teachers to track the learning experience over a period of time. Any collection of work that showcases the student as learner, from writing folders to required demonstrations of language proficiency. Portfolios are developmental, allowing students to make constant updates to document their progress (Tierney, Carter, & Desai 1991) and represent active processes (selecting, comparing, self-evaluation, sharing, goal-setting) more than products.

The teacher’s role in selecting work for the student portfolio is critical in helping students to set learning goals. The teacher helps students articulate reasons for including each piece in their portfolios and encourages them to be explicit as to why they feel certain pieces should be included and how they reached their decision. One of the chapters in this section of the *Report* describes a longitudinal study of the use of the portfolio in the language classroom.

Evaluation is the product of assessment, a step toward understanding and drawing conclusions. After gathering data (information and evidence), teachers collect all the learning data and evaluate the products of their efforts and the progress of their students. Strickland and Strickland (1998) note “to find answers, teachers need to know how to gather the data and how to analyze the information, much the way anthropological and sociological researchers do. Such gathering and analysis requires a knowledge of qualitative assessment techniques, such as keeping anecdotal records, conducting interviews, compiling checklists, and carrying on dialogue discussions” (p. 30). Evaluation thus becomes an extension of learning by offering concrete and understandable feedback rather than simply a number or letter that offers little in the way of improving achievement.

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The primary user of assessment information is the student. If students are to assume a level of responsibility for their own learning, they must have information they understand, that is accurate, immediate and delivered in a way that encourages further learning. After assessing and evaluating, teachers have the responsibility of sharing their evaluations with the interested parties such as parents, administrators, other teachers and, of course, the general public.

Conclusion

With clearly identified results and appropriate evidence of understanding, teachers can plan instructional activities. Wiggins and McTighe (1998) describe the most effective curricular designs as “backward,” a design created by Ralph Tyler (1949) fifty years ago: identify the desired results (goals or standards), determine the acceptable evidence (performances) called for by the standards, and plan the learning experiences and instruction (the teaching) needed to equip students to perform (pp. 8-9). Assessment thereby drives the instruction. Through ongoing assessment the teacher adjusts the instruction as needed and continually assesses learning progress and growth. Assessment becomes an extension of the learning, providing continual feedback to improve achievement. Learning becomes a process, not merely a product, instilling in students how to learn while learning. By helping students to evaluate and regulate their own learning, students become active participants in the learning process and see first-hand the connection between effort and results.

Classroom practice aligns with research findings when teachers integrate practices that put student needs first and call for strong student involvement in

every facet of classroom instruction and assessment (Chappuis & Chappuis, 2002). The articles in this section of the *Report* provide a variety of instructional strategies for enhancing learning and suggestions for differentiating instruction given students' diverse learning styles and characteristics. These scientifically documented instructional strategies (e.g. computer assisted language learning; feedback techniques; cooperative learning; self-regulation) will assist the language teacher in integrating research-based curriculum and instruction into the classroom to optimize student achievement.

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