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Changing Evidence of Learning: Redesigning Instruction Through the World-Readiness Standards

By RACHEL GRESSEL



World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages state, “regardless of reason [for studying], languages have something to offer everyone.”

When I started teaching in 1999, I often heard, “Why are we learning Spanish? Why doesn’t everyone just learn English?” Students have not asked me those questions in years. Today’s learners have so many options as to which languages they will study. Each may have a different reason for studying languages, but as the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages state, “regardless of reason, languages have something to offer everyone.” This means that as language educators, we need to ensure we are redesigning instruction and assessment so that we are reaching out to students learning a heritage language, students wanting to travel, students wanting to learn for business, for communicative purposes, or for making connections, and more.

I have a vivid memory of learning the irregular preterite verbs from my AMSCO Spanish workbook during my freshman year of high school. I sat on my bedroom floor with my back against my bed, legs spread out across my grey carpet. I repeated to myself, “Andar goes to anduv. Poner goes to pus. Poder goes to pud.” Then, I remember repeating “e, iste, o, imos, skip vosotros, ieron.” After about 15 minutes of repetition, I had the verbs down cold. Two weeks later, my friend Kristin needed to memorize the verbs. I used the same strategy to help her; I went to her house and we repeated the verbs. The next day, I quizzed her. She couldn’t remember any of the verbs. Why was she forgetting them? Why was she wasting my time? It was as though

we had never practiced them at all. Kristin ended up taking Spanish for 2 years, then moving on to other electives.

I became a Spanish teacher for many reasons. One of the major reasons is because I excelled in Spanish and I was a good student. The memory of teaching myself the irregular preterite on my bedroom floor is one that makes me smile. When Kristin thinks of me quizzing her and her struggling to remember the irregular preterite, I don't think she has that same feeling. I think about how my current district has 16 sections of beginning Spanish comprised mostly of freshman students. By the time these students are enrolled in a class senior year, there are usually only about seven sections of Spanish. We have lost over half of our pool of language learners due to attrition. Teaching grammar in isolation does not make our students world ready. The World-Readiness Standards are designed to provide global competence for all students. Getting them to the Novice level of proficiency is not enough. That means we have to vary our approach in order to reach all of our learners.

I have been out of the classroom for a little over 3 years now, serving as the World Languages Department chair at a school that offers eight different languages. My school is one school district with Grades 9–12. My favorite thing to do is to observe in classes where I don't know the language. Based on my language background, I can usually adapt quickly in an American Sign Language, French, German, or Hebrew class. The students always think I am proficient in every language we offer, and I am happy to keep up the charade. However, if I am observing a Chinese or Japanese class, I am out of my element. I can figure out what is going on because I know what teaching looks like and I know what language learning looks like. Although when the teachers and students are speaking in Chinese and Japanese, 90% of the time I can't understand what is being said, I can read gestures and body language, follow visual cues, and pick up on routines. But I like to sit back and look around, letting the language wash over me. Students are asking questions of one another, interpreting short texts, comparing and contrasting daily routines, presenting their research to one another. These students have a language skill I do not have. They can communicate with so many people in so many situations that they will have many doors open up for them.

Teaching to the World-Readiness Standards means there is direct instruction on learning strategies. Students need to be encouraged to be fearless and speak in the language they are learning. They need to feel safe to make mistakes in the classroom or they never will feel comfortable speaking in a real-world situation. I was observing in a Spanish II class recently. The teacher said to the students, "Everyone speak Spanish, no extra chatter. If someone doesn't know, let them struggle like a little kid does. You tell the kid to get a spoon, he comes back with a sock. He can't eat his soup. He learns how to get the spoon."

Teachers must in fact encourage mistakes. That same teacher said to the students, "Go ahead, ask the question. It's OK. Don't be nervous. We're all learning together." Students repeat memorized phrases to one another that had been reinforced the previous day,

including: "It is similar to . . .", "It is used to . . .", or "You find it in . . ." Students use cues to move the conversation forward, such as "I agree with you because . . .", "I disagree because . . .", "In my opinion . . .", and "I don't understand. Can you explain in other words?" The World-Readiness Standards outline the need to learn strategies to bridge communication gaps, including circumlocution, deriving meaning, interpreting, inferring, reflecting, and predicting. The energy level in that class is high. Students are excited to create with the language.

Redesigning instruction and assessment is hard work. The World-Readiness Standards contain powerful information about performance and proficiency to help ensure that students become better communicators. There are Standards for Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. We can make direct correlations to Common Core, to disciplinary literacy, and to teacher evaluation frameworks. But there is no silver bullet where we can be handed a curriculum saying teach these skills in this sequence in Spanish I. Use these authentic resources and infographics. Incorporate these technologies.

Fifteen years ago, I worked for a school district where our curriculum was not aligned. There were eight different teachers teaching Spanish II in eight different ways, preparing students differently for Spanish III. In order to get the teachers on the same page, our director purchased a new textbook series. We were all required to use materials only from the textbook for the first year after adoption. Once we began to incorporate other materials, every teacher had to use them. In this way, the curriculum became common to all members of the department.

This textbook-based strategy will not work as we redesign instruction and assessment to incorporate the World-Readiness Standards, as the document states: "The standards have been written to suggest that the goals of language learning cannot be divided into a set of sequenced steps . . . differences in cognitive development, maturity, and interests will determine the pace at which learners make progress."

Textbooks do not always take into account the needs of our heritage learners, do not always include authentic and timely materials, and do not always allow for a shift from teacher-directed to student-directed course of study, based on students' personal interests. In order to create a curriculum that will help students be college-, career-, and world-ready, that curriculum design needs to shift from planning for the four skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening) to the three modes of communication (Interpretive, Interpersonal, Presentational). The new edition of World-Readiness Standards allows for real-world applications; thinking of languages as world languages instead of foreign languages. The World-Readiness Standards help guide teachers to create a framework for "knowing how, when, and why to say what to whom" rather than just knowing how to say what (using grammar and vocabulary in isolation).

Change is hard. However, these shifts in strategies will pay off in ways both great and small. One of the teachers at my school attended a transformative workshop this past summer put on by



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our state organization. TALL-IL (Training for the Assessment of Language Learning in Illinois) is a joint project by Illinois Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ICTFL) and ACTFL, which takes teachers through the implementation of Standards-based unit design through a focus on performance assessments. This teacher was able to collaborate with other language educators to explore a unit via *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McGighe, 1998) which challenged the more traditional ways he had taught in the past (with vocabulary and grammar in isolation).

This teacher is a singleton, meaning he is the only teacher of his language. He is 20 years into his teaching career, so he refers to this year as his “mid-life teaching crisis.” He has changed his grade-book to include only Interpretive, Interpersonal, and Presentational categories and he is modifying his assessments and projects so that all are directly connected to the modes of communication. He has discovered infographics. During his formal 2-day observation, he had students work together to interpret infographics of *shinkansen*, the high speed trains in Japan. Students in Level III spoke entirely in Japanese. The engaging level of the infographic allowed for differentiated conversations; each learner was able to enter the dialogue at a level where he or she felt comfortable. Students created questions about the infographic and passed the questions to different groups,

then they worked together to interpret the infographic and solve the questions the other groups posed to them. As they left class, students stopped the teacher to tell him that they had fun with the infographic.

A few weeks previously, this teacher had spun a traditional research project on its head. Students researched a region in Japan and presented information to their partner. They needed to focus on their questioning techniques, on their ability to clarify, and on their ability to negotiate meaning with one another. Students told the teacher that instead of listening to 20 different presentations, they felt empowered presenting to a partner, and then learning from a partner. They were able to learn more in depth about regions of Japan. As the presenter, they felt more accountable to their partner, knowing they really had to make sure they understood the project. As the listener, they felt more engaged, knowing they had to follow up, ask questions, and clarify their understanding.

With the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages, more emphasis is placed on assessment than has been in the past. As the Standards are tied to Performance Descriptors and Progress Indicators, both students and teachers need to know how well learners are able to use the language. Instructors need to create scaffolded tasks based on what students can do with the language; they need formative assessment checks in order to do this. There are several assessments that are built on frameworks grounded on the World-Readiness Standards, such as integrated performance assessments (IPAs), the Advanced Placement (AP) exams, and the ACTFL Assessment of Performance towards Proficiency in Languages (AAPPL). However, there are many ways to tie in more formative assessment as well; our interpretation of formative assessment in the language classroom continues to evolve. When I began evaluating language teachers a few years ago, they would tell me on their pre-observation planning forms that they were going to formatively assess by checking entrance and exit slips, homework, and look at the quizzes later in the week. While some of these strategies are still used today, we hear a lot of talk about assessment being used as a checkup rather than a postmortem; but we need to know today, in the moment, how students are doing with what they are learning. If they are struggling, educators need to be able to check in and reteach to reach all learners.

There are countless ways to insert learning checks and formative assessments into the language classroom on a daily basis. Technology makes this very possible. Currently, my district is phasing in a 1:1 initiative with Google Chromebooks, so our freshmen and sophomores all have devices. Some of the tools that our language teachers have found successful include Kahoot, PollEverywhere, GoSoapbox, Google Forms, Socrative, Peardeck, Today's Meet, and Quizlet. It does not really matter which tool is used. The point is that teachers are able to systematically diagnose how much a student has understood, how well a student can interpret, and how a learner can perform in a controlled environment, so they can modify instruction accordingly. I have observed teachers that do the same thing without technology just as effectively. They have students hold up answers

on whiteboards or hold their thumbs up/down/to the side. Students snap their fingers if they think the answer is A and clap their hands if they think the answer is B. Students rate themselves on a post-it on the corner of their desk or display a colored cup (red=stop and help; yellow=still thinking; green=go ahead). Students compose a Facebook status, tweet, or #hashtag of the most important point from class that day. Teachers can use this information and modify instruction instantly. These learning checks are usually most effective when pre-planned and varied.

Students should play an active role in the path toward world readiness by self-assessing. It is important that students understand what they need to know and be able to do, what they actually can do, and how they can fill in that gap. When working with students to self-assess, another powerful tool is the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements. When students see that the next step in the language acquisition process is not to perfectly form complex sentences with the imperfect subjunctive and the conditional, but instead to ask for and provide information about a hobby or a lifestyle, such as sports, language learning becomes more manageable.

Instead of telling the teacher "I don't get this," the Can-Do Statements can help students express that "I can introduce myself but I keep struggling and I can't introduce someone else." Linking the formative assessment and learning checks explicitly to the Can-Do Statements (or daily learning objectives) will make the connection clearer for students. "I got #1 and #2 right on the GoSoapbox assessment, so I know that I can introduce myself. I got #3 and #4 wrong on the assessment, which is how I know that I need help introducing someone else."

Teaching to the World-Readiness Standards means assessing performance and proficiency. Rubrics are an important part of the assessment equation, especially in today's climate where student growth is a part of many teachers' evaluations. I have spent 4 days this year designing common rubrics with five members of our department. To begin, we focused on interpersonal rubrics, as we felt this is an area that requires lifting up in our department. As a district, we need to build capacity of what an effective interpersonal task looks like. We have begun to create tasks together that can transcend languages. We examined rubrics from *Implementing Integrated Performance Assessment* by Bonnie Adair-Hauck, Eileen Glisan, and Francis Troyan (2013; see p. 58), from *The Keys to Assessing Language Performance* by Paul Sandrock (2010; see p. 54), and by many of the documents by the Ohio Foreign Language Association (OFLA).

We decided that we wanted to create living rubrics on Google Docs that had links for both students and teachers. These rubrics have instructions for teacher use, strategies for students to advance from one performance level to the next, and an ability to cut and paste performance levels based on student level, from Novice Low through Advanced Low. We are still in our planning stages, talking through the various components in the rubrics, discussing what this will look like in different languages, and debating how to transfer this into a Student Learning Objective for the state.

We do struggle to find the time to come together and we hesitate to implement something new in our classrooms before it is tried, tested, and considered more polished and ready. We are piloting our rubrics department-wide during this semester and reviewing them over the summer. Our Interpersonal Communication rubric has three categories, which include Language Function and Structure, Interaction, and Comprehensibility. The rubric is written in student-friendly, "I can" statements. Our strategies for students include links to programs like WeSpeke, where students can practice their language online for free, or to Quizlet, with explanations of how each type of activity (Cards, Learn, Speller, Race, Scatter, Test) will help them reach their target. Moving forward, we plan on having district-wide Interpersonal and Presentational rubrics so that we can focus on incorporating IPAs into our curricula.

In our district, we are fortunate to have the support of our administration in making shifts that are aligned with the World-Readiness Standards. The challenge is to align these shifts to district and state initiatives that are not specific to world languages, so that all change is as meaningful as we can make it for our language learners. When working with Student Learning Objectives for the state, we will tie in our common rubrics. When working with student discussion techniques for the district, we will hone in on Interpersonal Communication. When focusing in on increasing access to AP classes for all students, we will work to align our course sequence beginning at the lower levels. In the conclusion of the World-Readiness Standards, it states that they have had a transformative impact on language learning. In our district, this has certainly proven to be true. We are moving away from teaching grammar in isolation (such as lists of irregular preterite verbs), towards a more integrated approach. At the end of 2015, for the first time, we administered the AAPPL to 500 incoming freshmen to best place them in language classes for next year. In previous years, we used a multiple-choice vocabulary and grammar test to decide if someone is ready for French I or French II.

We need to empower our students. By providing rich curricular experiences with real-world applications, we ensure that "students are not just college-and career-ready, but are also world-ready." By focusing on language learning strategies, using formative assessment techniques to modify instruction in the moment, and viewing rubrics as living documents, teachers will take great strides forward in making the learning process more transparent to learners. I know that my colleagues and I have a long road ahead of us and that much work is still in store, but I look forward to a day where our curriculum, instruction, and assessment will entice more of our students to remain in our program for its full duration. Looking back at the progress made since my high school years and since the beginning of my teaching career, I can see how far I have come and I have great hope for the future.

Remember my friend Kristin? I'm hoping that she will let me try again with her, if I promise not to drill her on all of the verb endings.

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