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Comprehensible Input and Proficiency-Based Grading: A Curriculum Designed for Novice-Mid French Students

Ingrid Narum

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COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT AND PROFICIENCY-BASED GRADING:

A CURRICULUM DESIGNED FOR NOVICE-MID FRENCH STUDENTS

by

Ingrid Narum

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English as a Second Language.

Hamline University

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Primary Advisor: Trish Harvey
Peer Reviewer: Ellen Chirhart

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Having been a language teacher for almost ten years, I am continually looking for ways to improve my teaching practices and increase my students' success in my classroom. When I started teaching, my French classroom looked vastly different than it does today. I used to only teach grammar the old-fashioned way, explicitly, with charts and worksheets. Class started with translation warm-ups every day. The tests I wrote were punitive and all about adding up errors to determine students' grades. This is not to say that my classroom was boring and that students never learned anything; however, looking back I am embarrassed at some of the lessons and tests I created. Through my coursework at Hamline, grading initiatives in my district and more research of my own, I began to adapt and evolve my teaching practices. This led me to ask the question: *How do comprehensible input and proficiency-based grading affect language learning in the classroom?*

In this chapter, I will outline how my experiences as a language educator shaped my current paradigm in the classroom: away from traditional methods and toward comprehensible input and proficiency-based grading.

My Educational Experience

I began studying French in middle school. My teacher was creative and engaging, but most of our class activities, homework and assessments were very traditional. I conjugated verbs, translated vocabulary and memorized dialogues. Most of this was done

in isolation and not in any real-world context. In high school, my classes were not very different. I ended up going to a summer camp to learn French for two summers, which was less traditional and I learned enough to skip a level in high school. However, there were many holes in my knowledge and I was forced to fill in the gaps for myself between the traditional course I had skipped and the more authentic language learning at the camp. I struggled to succeed in the traditional course after having experienced language learning in an authentic context, but I was motivated enough to overcome these obstacles and achieve good grades. I remained interested in the subject and decided to continue my studies in college.

In my undergraduate coursework, I was only required to take one semester-long class on teaching languages. Otherwise, my two majors - French and Education - were completely separate from each other. My French classes did focus more on authentic language learning, but there was still a high degree of emphasis on vocabulary and structures. As far as becoming prepared for my career as a French teacher, I barely learned pedagogy related directly to language learning or best teaching practices in the foreign language classroom. Going through my coursework at Hamline University to obtain my ESL license, I began to understand language learning on a more academic level. I learned about theories and pedagogy; linguistics and the history of English. Through my learning at Hamline, I began to incorporate more best practices I learned through my ESL coursework into my French classroom with positive results. As I took on teaching ESL classes, I not only used ESL-specific best practices but those practices that also worked in my French classroom.

As my teaching shifted and evolved, I began to seek out more professional development on creating curriculum and assessing students using a more authentic, production-based approach rather than one that was punitive. A couple of summers ago, I went to one particularly life-changing, week-long session that focused on authentic materials and assessments. It prompted me to rewrite most of my curriculum before school started that year. This was the beginning of my paradigm shift in language teaching from traditional, grammar-based strategies toward a classroom that uses authentic sources, comprehensible input and proficiency-based grading.

Classroom Changes

One major change in my classroom was that I began using strategies from other methods of language teaching, such as TPRS (Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling) and the PACE Model (Presentation of meaningful language, Attention Co-Construct and Explanation, Extension Activity) of grammar instruction. TPRS instruction in the language classroom means using authentic materials, lots of repetition and story-based instruction (Adair-Hauck & Donato, 2002b). The PACE model introduces language systems in a way that helps students notice language structures, patterns and systems (Adair-Hauck & Donato, 2002b). I have found, however, that completely eliminating grammar instruction is not beneficial either, as students then don't understand concepts such as verb conjugations and syntax, so I am still finding the right balance. In most of my lessons, whether grammar, vocabulary or culture-related, I put the cognitive load on the student. If we are learning a new verb, they find the pattern by reading a story. If we are learning new vocabulary, they guess the meaning based on an

infographic. Instead of filling out verb charts or translating sentences on a test, they are writing a letter to a penpal showing me they can use those verbs and vocabulary. I have received positive feedback from my students and I believe that their confidence levels have skyrocketed when it comes to authentic production of the language. I still use some activities and strategies from when I first started teaching to reinforce certain structures and vocabulary, but I now also use many lesson activities and instructional strategies to more authentically achieve language production in my classroom.

Assessments

I have also drastically changed how I assess students' language proficiency. I use IPAs (Integrated Performance Assessments) instead of rigid vocabulary and grammar tests (Adair-Hauck et al., 2006). There are six components to the IPA: Interpretive Reading, Interpretive Listening, Presentational Writing, Presentational Speaking, Interpersonal Writing and Interpersonal Speaking. I do not test my students on all six modes of communication each time we complete a unit of study; rather, I rotate between the six to provide a more authentic context for the unit we are studying and to avoid overloading students with assessments. The rationale for the IPA is rooted in authentic, real-world contexts so that students may demonstrate their knowledge in an authentic context (Adair-Hauck et al., 2006).

Grading Changes

With new assessments came the question of how to grade them. In my ideal world, students would only receive feedback, not grades. The world we live in, however, requires us to assess and grade students. In the spring of 2018, my school started piloting

a proficiency-based grading system and I volunteered for the following fall. Proficiency-based grading is also known as standards-based grading or equal interval grading, although there are some nuanced differences. In our school, we work on a four-point scale that functions similarly to the GPA scale. Students no longer receive scores out of 100, although their final grade calculation does produce a letter grade that looks the same on their transcript. Since we were no longer giving 100-point scale grades, there was a lot of rubric and assessment writing and rewriting required. I received hours for summer work and began the process.

Over the summer of 2018, I did a lot of reading on the topic in addition to talking to other schools about their successes and pitfalls in transitioning to this new system. I worked all summer on new assessments and rubrics. When school started, I was very honest with my students that I was new to this, I was doing this for their best interest, and I was looking for feedback all along the way. I learned a lot my first time through an entire curriculum using this system. For the most part, I received good feedback from my students and changed things accordingly along the way. It went relatively well, mostly due to the constant conversations with and feedback from my students. I began to wonder, however, how their learning compared to my previous students' using my old methods.

Curriculum Design

As I progressed in my professional evolution, I wrote and subsequently changed a lot of new curriculum. My first attempt at writing a new curriculum incorporating all of the best practices outlined in the next chapter was not completely successful. It was,

however, a step in the right direction, which led me to more research and literature. By using Understanding by Design and Backwards Design by Wiggins and McTighe (2011), I will be able to incorporate content standards and best practices to design effective curriculum.

Capstone Project

This capstone project was created to provide a curriculum for secondary French teachers who have had similar struggles and questions in their classroom: How do I bring real-world contexts into the classroom? How do I design effective assessments to truly assess student performance and proficiency? How do I design rubrics to ensure fair grading practices? What activities should I use in class to facilitate student success?

This curriculum design will be intended for secondary, high school learners who are at a novice-mid proficiency level. I hope that it is implemented and inspires better curriculum design in other French classrooms.

Summary

My research question, *How do comprehensible input and proficiency-based grading affect language learning in the classroom?*, is relevant to my daily life as a language teacher and at the core of my teaching. I feel as though both have had a positive effect on my classroom, but I do not have any hard evidence that my students' learning has improved compared to the traditional language instruction and grading methods. I hope that in reviewing the literature and designing curriculum, I learn how and why comprehensible input and proficiency-based grading have a positive impact on students' learning.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Throughout my relatively short tenure as a secondary French teacher, the way I instruct and assess my students has shifted considerably. When I first started teaching, my classroom incorporated traditional, memorization-based practices with little emphasis on culture or authentic sources. Now, my classroom has changed to use comprehensible input-based strategies with a focus on proficiency and authentic materials. As Pica (2005) eloquently stated, "teachers of language have become teachers of language learners" (p. 339). My school has also switched from a traditional grading system to proficiency-based grading (also referred to as standards-based grading). This paradigm shift over the course of my teaching career has led me to ask the question: *How do comprehensible input and proficiency-based grading affect language learning in the classroom?* In this chapter, I review the literature pertaining to the best practices for adolescent language learning and curriculum design. I review the research behind comprehensible input, which informs the practices discussed in this chapter. I also review classroom instructional strategies that emphasize student-centered learning and negotiating meaning. I look at tasks and activities that promote language acquisition and production in the classroom. I review assessments in the language classroom that incorporate authentic sources and real-world contexts as well as proficiency-based grading practices. I then review effective curriculum design for foreign language classrooms that incorporate national standards

from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages as well as

Understanding by Design.

First, I review the research and theories behind comprehensible input and how it

informs curriculum design and classroom instruction.

Comprehensible Input

According to Krashen (1989), comprehensible input is the idea that "we acquire

language by understanding messages" (p. 440). The model of comprehensible input in the

foreign language classroom is therefore not a new idea. The name has, however, come to

describe a paradigm of language teaching that shifts away from traditional,

grammar-based instruction and centers more on authentic language acquisition and

negotiating meaning. According to Schulz (2006), "comprehending and expressing

personal meanings is valued more highly than grammatical accuracy" (p. 252).

Comprehensible input also takes the focus off of the teacher and places the majority of

the cognitive load on the student as the language learner. Aski (2009) stated that "in order

for language development to occur, the learner must be cognitively engaged in all stages

of comprehension and production" (pp. 40-41). This applies to all instruction and

activities in the classroom using comprehensible input strategies. This section focuses on

the research behind these strategies.

Krashen's Input Hypothesis

Krashen (1992) attested that we acquire language by interpreting messages

through comprehensible input, not direct language instruction. Although we cannot get

rid of traditional, direct grammar-based instruction altogether, there is a way to introduce

grammatical concepts after a significant amount of comprehensible input. Krashen (1992) also argued that grammar rules are only used as a monitor, or an editor, and that over time these rules become engrained through comprehensible input. He also stated that the best way to achieve grammatical development through comprehensible input is by reading (p. 411). This research done almost thirty years ago is the foundation for today's foreign language classrooms that use comprehensible input as a basis for their instruction, activities and assessment.

Authentic Sources in Language Acquisition

One key principle of comprehensible input is the focus on authentic sources. Schulz (2006) stated that ideal comprehensible input comes from authentic sources. The focus is on "real-life" situations in context of the level of language being taught (p. 253). That is to say, these sources are not created by textbook companies, but sources found in the real world that are still accessible to language learners at their level. This allows learners at all levels to negotiate meaning of texts that were written for and by native speakers.

There are critics of the idea of only using authentic texts for comprehensible input in the classroom. Some believe that these authentic texts should be modified to fit the needs and language level of the learner in the second language (L2). O'Donnell (2009) believed that there is a middle ground to be found to satisfy both sides of this argument. She stated, "authentic texts can be modified so as to increase comprehensibility without sacrificing L2 discourse features that make such passages well for L2 instruction" (p. 513). Depending on the text, the features or vocabulary being studied and the language

level of the learner, authentic texts could be modified to suit the needs of the learners. If at all possible, however, teachers should attempt to find authentic sources to incorporate comprehensible input into their classroom instruction.

Interpretive Tasks

Since the classroom instruction emphasis is on authentic sources, assessments and classroom activities should reflect this instruction. Interpretive Performance Assessments (IPAs) are becoming the new normal for assessing language learners in foreign language classrooms. Adair-Hauck et al. (2006) stated that an assessment is authentic if it is based in real-world contexts. They emphasize that authentic texts are by native speakers for native speakers (p. 368). By using IPAs as assessments and backward design to create similar classroom activities to prepare, teachers are preparing their students to negotiate meaning outside of the classroom. This idea will be further expanded upon in the second and third sections of this chapter.

Reflecting on Language Systems and Patterns

Because comprehensible input takes away most traditional grammar-based instruction, more time is necessary for language learners to reflect on systems and patterns on their own. In using authentic materials chosen to highlight certain grammatical themes, students use their own guided reflections to recognize these themes. Liamkina, et al. (2012), while discussing adult learners, came to the important conclusion that "guided metareflection" can provide learners with opportunities to reflect on the language use and make comparisons with their native language (L1) to better understand systems and patterns in the language being learned (L2).

Summary

Comprehensible input is a key component of foreign language acquisition in secondary classrooms. Krashen's research and theories inform curriculum and instruction decisions made in today's classrooms. His Input Hypothesis reinforces the need for using authentic sources made by and for native speakers in the classroom. These authentic sources are the basis for interpretive activities and assessments in the classroom. Language learners can then be engaged in and reflect on their own learning to better understand structures and patterns of the L2.

Next, I want to delve further into the methods of classroom instruction introduced in the previous section. In the next section, I explore best practices for classroom instruction using comprehensible input. I look at strategies to embed grammar and culture into instruction in the foreign language classroom. Finally, this section looks at two specific models for teaching new vocabulary and grammatical concepts using comprehensible input and authentic sources in the target language.

Classroom Instruction

Rodgers (2014) criticized traditional foreign language instruction by asking the compelling question: "simply because we have *taught* a particular structure, can we assume it has been *learned*?" (p. 17). Traditional language instruction does not leave room for a student to apply the concept being taught to any real-world contexts; instead, it is learned in isolation and often not committed to long-term memory as a result. The research behind comprehensible input and authentic sources necessitates a change from traditional language instruction to real-world, proficiency-based curriculum. Although the

shift to a more proficiency-based curriculum in language classrooms takes in-class focus away from the teacher, instruction is still a key component in the classroom. Setting students up for success to carry the cognitive load is essential. While there is no magic single strategy to reach every student, there are several strategies that work well to introduce new concepts, vocabulary or interpretive tasks. TPRS (Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling) is becoming increasingly common in today's language classrooms. The PACE Model (Presentation of meaningful language, Attention Co-Construct and Explanation, Extension Activity) is another strategy that works well to introduce grammar concepts that are rooted in patterns. Structures, vocabulary and culture should be embedded into classroom activities where possible.

Embedded Grammar Instruction

Instead of explicitly teaching grammar, as is traditional, it is now best practice to embed grammar instruction into language curriculum. This does not mean teaching explicit grammar, but instead incorporating grammar into regular instruction. "Grammatical forms are in themselves meaningful: They help construe reality in particular ways for the purposes of linguistically based communication" (Liamkina et al., 2012, p. 273). Once meaning and connections have been made by the student in recognizing patterns and forms, language fluency is likely to become more developed (Spada & Lightbown, 2008). This allows for structural patterns and forms to be committed to long-term memory and these structures are more likely to be used by the language learner in the future.

Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS) and Embedded

Culture

      One best practice for language instruction with embedded grammar instruction is

Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS). This practice also allows

for opportunities to embed culture in the academic learning, both implicit and explicit. It

is important to choose a text with appropriate vocabulary and structures for the language

level of the students. Once a text is chosen that highlights a structure or vocabulary

theme, it is important to preview the story with "some prelistening or prestorytelling

activities" (Adair-Hauck & Donato, 2002b, p. 279). This may include vocabulary

introduction, making predictions, and previewing the setting and is done largely by the

teacher. Once the storytelling has begun, the teacher should employ strategies such as

miming, using props or gesturing to help convey the plot and setting of the story. This

helps to scaffold the meaning of the story and check for understanding. The story will

most likely need to be told more than once to ensure comprehension by students. Once

the story is understood as a whole, the teacher can begin to call attention to a particular

structure or vocabulary theme. They may choose to use the PACE Model to conclude the

rest of this learning activity. In addition, the teacher may choose to embed cultural

knowledge from the story into the extension activity.

PACE Model (Presentation of meaningful language, Attention Co-Construct and

Explanation, Extension Activity)

      The PACE model of teaching language structures goes hand in hand with TPRS.

The reading or story chosen with the TPRS model is often the perfect authentic source to

introduce a structural or grammatical concept at any language level. The chosen authentic

source is presented to students in a meaningful, scaffolded way. This embodies the P

(presentation of meaningful language) of PACE. The next portion, the Attention phase,

allows for the teacher to bring attention to the structural concept being introduced. This is

the most explicit instruction that students will receive. Although some argue against

explicit grammar instruction, this is a necessary step in the process for students to be able

to navigate the new lesson being learned. Adair-Hauck and Donato (2002a) stated that

"this alternative approach can reconcile the explicit/implicit polarized views" of language

instruction (p. 268). It calls attention to patterns emerging given the context of the

reading or story.

The next step after the Attention portion is the Co-Construct and Explanation.

This allows for students to search for more examples of the patterns explained in the

Attention phase. Students are "encouraged to make guesses, predict, hypothesize and

generalize about the target forms" (Adair-Hauck & Donato, 2002b, p. 285). Students look

through the text, often working together to find patterns and forms. Once these are

noticed by the students, it is imperative the teacher guide the students to the function of

the target forms if it is not able to be identified by the students. This is where the term

co-construct is established: "The reciprocity of the dialogue encourages the learners and

the teachers to co-construct and discover the underlying patterns or consistent forms"

(Adair-Hauck & Donato, 2002b, p. 285).

The final step of the PACE model is the extension activity. This allows for

students to have time to put the forms into practice and context in a creative way. The

extension activity should also allow for practice in communication, ideally

interpersonally. This is a key moment in language learning that allows for learners to

transfer "comprehensible input into output" (Adair-Hauck & Donato, 2002b, p. 286).

Summary

Providing language instruction that teaches individual concepts using authentic

sources and comprehensible input is essential to maximizing language learning in the

classroom. There are several strategies that place the cognitive load on the language

learner in order to search for patterns and structures. This ensures that learners see the

concept in context, not in isolation, which better prepares them to use the structure in

their language output. The authentic source chosen is often also used to embed culture

into instruction, which can be used in an extension activity.

Next, I want to examine student-focused activities in the classroom. Having

discussed teacher-led instruction, it is imperative to expand upon the tasks and activities

students engage in after this instruction has taken place.

Student Tasks and Activities

After new content has been introduced by the teacher, learners need to have time

in class to use this content in context and in interpersonal settings. This time in the

classroom is mostly spent with students working individually, in pairs or in groups. These

strategies allow for students to notice structures, patterns and to negotiate meaning in an

authentic way. Aski (2009) stated that "prior to producing language, learners need to

process the structures that they will eventually use" (p. 41) Learning is also more

effective if students focus on these structures while using the language to communicate

(Nassaji, 2000). This section discusses student-centered activities including interpreting authentic print and audio sources, information gap activities and communication-based tasks. The teacher should also give feedback during and after these activities in order to prepare students for the assessment(s) of similar nature.

Interpreting Authentic Sources

A key function of language acquisition is learning to interpret authentic sources. While teacher instruction can teach strategies for understanding authentic materials, language learners need to practice negotiating meaning from print and audio sources. Teachers should focus on designing activities where "learners are only able to achieve the outcome if they have both noticed and comprehended the specific linguistic forms needed to achieve the outcome" (Shintani, 2013, p. 39). These activities should not require the learner to produce the language in any way, rather they should focus on the students noticing forms and features of the language to interpret the material (Aski, 2009). Placing students in pairs or small groups to collaborate to achieve the outcome is a common strategy while students are practicing this skill in the classroom. Assessing these skills will be discussed in the next section.

Information Gap Activities

Another common strategy in foreign language classrooms is information gap activities. Students are paired together, often with opposite information. Students must then use the language to acquire their partner's information as well as provide their information to their partner. For example, when practicing telling time, Partner A is given the time of Event A. Partner B needs this information and must ask Partner A in the target

language for this time. Partner A then asks their partner for the time of Event B, as they are missing that information. Students use the target language to ascertain the information that they are missing, and answer the questions of their partners.

As this is a practice activity, students may not be successful on their first attempt. They may need to rephrase or restate the information in order for their partner to comprehend. Pica (2005) stated that information gap tasks' "goal-oriented interaction requirements set up conditions for students to receive feedback, enhance their comprehension, and attend to message form and meaning" (p. 341). By requiring students to both provide and receive information, interpersonal communication is the key goal in negotiating meaning in this task.

Communication-based Tasks

In addition to information gap activities, there are many other pair and small group activities that can be used in the language classroom. Nassaji (2000) attested that "from a communicative perspective, the most effective way to assist language learning in the classroom is through communicative tasks" (p. 244). When designing these types of tasks, Aski (2009) stated that communication-based tasks should first have a goal for the students to accomplish, and second that participants play an active role in achieving that task. Aski (2009) also stated that in order for a communication-based task to be effective, it must include the following three things:

1. both participants supply and request information;

2. each participant holds a different portion of the information that must be shared and manipulated;

3. the participants have the same goal and they must reach a consensus on only

one outcome. (p. 45)

The last component mentioned is essential, as open-ended tasks often result in confusion

and lack of motivation in language learners. In knowing there is one outcome, students

are able to work together toward one goal, all while offering each other modified input as

feedback. This in turn results in modified output to achieve the goal of the task (Pica,

2005).

In grammar-focused tasks, students in pairs or small groups "interact with each

other to induce and formulate the grammatical rules underlying these sentences" (Nassaji,

2000, p. 246). This type of activity focuses less on overall communication, but instead on

a specific structural feature of the language. There should still be room for modified input

and output as well as one possible outcome. Grammar-focused tasks should not be the

only type of communication-based activity in the classroom, but it can be useful for

highlighting, practicing and recycling structural features of the language.

Feedback

While students can give each other feedback in the form of modified input and

output, as well as failure or success to achieving a task together, teacher feedback is also

inherent in classroom activities. Adair-Hauck et al. (2006) stated that feedback is

"anchored in the performance descriptions provided in rubrics and performance

exemplars that students explore before the assessment is administered, it occurs during

and between phases of the assessment, and its effect should be reflected in subsequent

performances" (p. 362). Spada and Lightbown (2008) stated that "feedback that comes during communicative interaction may have a positive effect on motivation" (p. 189).

Summary

This section sought to highlight the student-centered activities in the foreign language classroom. These activities highlight all modes of communication: interpretive, interpersonal and presentational. Pairs or small groups should be employed in the classroom to practice interpreting authentic sources. Information gap activities and other communication-based activities in the classroom must be designed with the learning target in mind, whether it be negotiating meaning or highlighting a grammatical function. These activities should all be designed so that students may use modified input and output to achieve a singular outcome. Teacher feedback is also an essential component of student-centered activities as it prepares students to be successful on their assessment(s).

Next, I discuss how to effectively assess and grade students' progress and achievement in the language classroom. This section will look at ways to embed authentic sources and real-world contexts into assessments, as well as using standards-based (proficiency-based) grading to effectively evaluate students' learning.

Assessments and Grading

Assessments in the language classroom are becoming more real-world based and centered on tasks that students may be presented with outside of the classroom. The assessment should have a direct correlation to the activities practiced in the classroom. In keeping with the ideals of comprehensible input and authentic real-world contexts, the focus of an assessment should be more on what the student can show they have learned,

and less about counting the errors in conjugation, pronunciation or spelling to determine a grade. Brown and Hudson (1998) stated that assessments should:

1. require problem solving and higher level thinking,

2. involve tasks that are worthwhile as instructional activities,

3. use real-world contexts or simulations,

4. focus on processes as well as products, and

5. encourage public disclosure of standards and criteria. (pp. 653-654)

Integrated performance assessments are increasing in popularity in the language classroom, which embed cultural knowledge as well as authentic sources (Adair-Hauck et al., 2006). When assessing students' understanding of interpretive tasks, questions are written in English about the authentic source to truly assess students' understanding of the print or audio source, not their comprehension of questions in the target language. For interpersonal and presentational tasks, real-world situations are presented to the student to assess their language production in an authentic manner.

Many districts, schools and teachers are choosing to use standards-based grading (also known as proficiency-based grading) to inform their grading practices. Because effective language assessments are not discrete point-based, writing suitable and clear rubrics for these assessments based on proficiency (not on points) is becoming increasingly important. Well-written and well-intentioned assessments can often be ruined by poor grading practices. Having clear standards, learning targets and rubrics is essential in effective proficiency-based grading (Muñoz & Guskey, 2015).

Integrated Performance Assessments

Most language classrooms that have chosen to shift away from traditional instruction have also chosen to implement integrated performance assessments as their main means to assess students' language acquisition. The foundation of integrated performance assessments (IPAs) is the use of authentic, real-life sources and situations to evaluate students' communicative competence in the language classroom (Adair-Hauck et al., 2006). There are six components: interpretive listening, interpretive reading, interpersonal speaking, presentational speaking, interpersonal writing and presentational writing. Adair-Hauck et al. (2006) outlined the parameters of a good IPA: assessing the student's knowledge and abilities in real-life situations, asking the student to apply their knowledge in these situations rather than reciting or listing, and allowing opportunities beforehand to practice and receive feedback on their "performances and products" (p. 361). The criteria (not the task) should be given ahead of time and practiced in scaffolded, similar contexts to prepare for the assessment. As stated previously, the key to this practice is the feedback, which focuses on "performance descriptions provided in rubrics and performance exemplars that students explore before the assessment is administered" (Adair-Hauck et al., 2006, p. 362). The assessment should be clear in its criteria and performance descriptors, rooted in authentic contexts with thoughtful, descriptive feedback after thoughtful instruction and student-centered activities that practice the same skills. Wiggins and McTighe (2011) stated, "in the best learning designs, there is no mystery as to performance goals or standards" (p. 10). Students

should be able to explain as well as the teacher what the essential learning goals of the unit and assessment are before completing the assessment.

Authentic, Real-world Context as Assessment

In Integrated Performance Assessments and other assessments in the language classroom, the goal is to provide students with real-life situations in which to be assessed. One of the essential questions when creating this type of assessment is "Am I assessing performance using standards-based and real-world tasks that are meaningful to students?" (Adair-Hauck et al., 2006, p. 365). When assessing students in the interpretive mode, one should always use authentic sources designed by native speakers, for native speakers. In presentational and interpersonal modes, students should be given a real-life situation as a task for the assessment. Purpura (2016) explained that in a "task-based" approach to second language (L2) assessment, criteria for the assessment should be "drawn from real-world standards of performance" (p. 195). By using backwards design with authentic, task-based assessments, the IPA introduces the unit's theme and purpose to students (Allen, 2009, p. 1283). This allows for proper practice and feedback leading up to the unit assessment.

Proficiency-Based Grading

Proficiency-based grading, often referred to as standards-based grading, focuses on what a student is able to do on performance assessments. The grade should be meaningful, in that it truly reflects the standards of the curriculum and what the student is able to do (Muñoz & Guskey, 2015). True proficiency-based grading eliminates the grading of practice altogether, although that is not often feasible or valued in our current

education system. Deddeh et al. (2010) used the analogy of an athlete or performer not being judged on their practice leading up to their performance or game, but simply the performance itself. Proficiency-based grading is also rooted in content mastery, compared to traditional grading which can take other factors into consideration like attendance or behavior (Deddeh et al., 2010). The focus shifts from the punitive traditional grading system to a system that values communicating student knowledge and achievement, largely based in rubrics written for performance assessments. This system lends itself well to the language classroom, as the primary focus is on what students are able to produce and interpret language in performance assessments that simulate authentic, real-time language situations.

Summary

This section discussed assessing student achievement, notably using Integrated Performance Assessments. Authentic sources and real-world situations should be used in creating these assessments to evaluate students' learning in the interpretive, interpersonal and presentational modes. Practice activities and thoughtful feedback should be provided leading up to these assessments. Using proficiency-based grading and effective rubric development is essential in implementing success performance assessments.

The next section concludes the literature review by examining two sources for designing effective foreign language curriculum.

Curriculum Design for Foreign Language Classrooms

Theories surrounding second language acquisition and instruction have evolved significantly over the past few decades. Foreign language classrooms no longer focus on

rote memorization of grammar concepts and vocabulary in isolation. The first part of this section will look at national standards set by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages in collaboration with the National Standards Collaborative Board (2015). ACTFL has evolved as an organization with the paradigms discussed in this chapter, and has developed World-Readiness Standards for language teachers across the country to use. Because state standards for foreign languages often do not exist, national standards were developed for teachers, schools and districts to use to create effective language curriculum. The second part of this section will look at the best practices outlined by Understanding by Design in designing effective curriculum and units in all classrooms.

World-readiness Standards and Performance Descriptors

The World-Readiness Standards created by ACTFL and the National Standards Collaborative Board (2015) are divided into five "C" goal areas: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons and Communities. The performance descriptors use these five goals to create level-specific benchmarks to guide curriculum development and design. ACTFL (2015) described performance as "the ability to use language that has been learned and practiced in an instructional setting" (p. 4). The goal of using the performance descriptors is to guide curriculum design to achieve student proficiency, which is defined as "the ability to use language in real world situations in a spontaneous interaction and non-rehearsed context and in a manner acceptable and appropriate to native speakers of the language" (ACTFL, 2015, p. 4).

As previously mentioned, there are three modes of effective communication: interpretive, interpersonal and presentational which all tie into the *Communication* goal. Interpretive communication requires students to understand, interpret and analyze print or audio sources. Interpersonal communication requires learners to interact and negotiate meaning in spoken or written conversations. Presentational communication requires learners to present information, concepts and ideas to various audiences, often using appropriate media to aid in the presentation of this information. Over the course of effective language curricula, students will be able to apply each mode of communication to a variety of topics using progressively advanced vocabulary and structures.

The *Cultures* goal focuses on products, practices and perspectives of communities where the L2 is spoken. Students learn to have effective interactions using cultural competence and understanding. The *Connections* goal allows students to connect knowledge and skills from other disciplines to the language classroom in a meaningful way. In addition to making connections, they access and evaluate information and diverse perspectives discussed in the language classroom.

The fourth "C" goal is *Comparisons*. This applies to both cultural and linguistic comparisons. Students develop insight into the language and culture in order to have meaningful interactions with cultural competence. The fifth and final "C" goal is *Communities*. This encourages the learner to apply their knowledge to their school and global community, as well as to become a lifelong learner that uses language for enjoyment, enrichment and advancement.

The five "C" goals outlined by ACTFL are the basis for the level-specific standards they created for teachers of all languages to use. ACTFL also created performance descriptors to guide curriculum design across all levels of language learning. There are three main levels of language proficiency: novice, intermediate and advanced. Each of these levels has three sub-levels: low, medium and high. The performance descriptors inform instruction and curriculum to help students proficiency increase across the levels. They incorporate the five "C" goals and the three modes of communication. Moreover, they "match the progression of language learning and inform the planning and sequencing of instruction" and "provide an outline to identify instructional outcomes" (ACTFL, 2015, p. 10). While at the novice level many topics are specified, many of the descriptors can be applied to a variety of topics at the intermediate and advanced levels.

Understanding by Design

While the guidelines put forth by ACTFL are extremely valuable in designing foreign language curriculum, Understanding by Design (UbD) provides more insight to effective unit design. *The Understanding by Design Guide to Creating High-quality Units* by Wiggins and McTighe (2011) defined UbD as "the intellectual equivalent of a GPS device in our car: by identifying a specific learning destination first, we are able to see the instructional path most likely to get us there" (p. 7). This seems simple, but as the authors explained, teachers often struggle with this idea. Instead, when planning units and curriculum, "we don't start with content; we start with what students are expected to be able to do with content" (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011, p. 7).

Expanding on UbD, Wiggins and McTighe (2011) also underlined the idea of "backward design" for planning units: identify desired results, determine acceptable evidence and plan learning experiences and instruction accordingly. By first using learning outcomes and desired evidence to show that student learning occurred, the rest of the unit can fall into place. Performance tasks are created to match the desired outcomes and evidence, and lessons and activities are designed to facilitate learning and create a comprehensive unit. By using this unit design and the assessments, instruction and activities outlined in the previous sections, a successful language curriculum can be developed using the best practices found in the literature.

Summary

In this section, the literature illustrated the best standards, goals and performance indicators specifically for foreign language classrooms provided by ACTFL. It also highlighted the universal Understanding by Design guide to planning units and curriculum in any classroom. This is all incorporated into the curriculum created for this capstone project.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined a review of literature relevant to this project. The purpose of this literature review was to provide a basis to the question: *How do comprehensible input and proficiency-based grading affect language learning in the classroom?* The first section of this chapter looked at how comprehensible input is essential to increase students' comprehension and output of the language through scaffolded tasks that allow students to make meaning from authentic sources. The second section of this chapter

examined best practices put forth by the literature on the topic of classroom instruction. The third section of this chapter discussed effective student-centered and task-based activities. The fourth section of this chapter looked at how assessment and grading affects learners' motivation and ability to communicate in the language being learned (L2). It also looked at the use of performance assessments and properly written rubrics in line with proficiency-based grading. The final section of this chapter examined World-Readiness Standards and Understanding by Design to outline successful design and implementation of units and curriculum.

The next chapter in this capstone, Chapter Three, will outline the curriculum project. I provide a rationale for why this curriculum is relevant and needed. Chapter Three also discusses the intended learner group for this curriculum, as well as how the project will be implemented in the classroom.

CHAPTER THREE

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Introduction

Over the course of my career as a language teacher, my teaching has evolved toward more comprehensible input and proficiency-based practices. This led me to my research question: *How do comprehensible input and proficiency-based grading affect language learning in the classroom?*

This chapter discusses the methods used to create a French curriculum using comprehensible input and proficiency-based grading, as well as other activities and assessments outlined as best practices from Chapter 2. This chapter explains the rationale for this curriculum development and how to put these theories into practice in a classroom setting. This chapter also explains the school in which it will be implemented. It is one unit of study in a novice French classroom that focuses on authentic resources, comprehensible input and proficiency-based grading aligned with Integrated Performance Assessments. The curriculum is based on the national standards created in 2015 by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), as well as the performance descriptors outlined to increase student proficiency, also created by ACTFL. This chapter also discusses the paradigm used to design this curriculum, Understanding by Design. This curriculum development was guided by the question: *How do comprehensible input and proficiency-based grading affect language learning in the classroom?*

Rationale

This curriculum was designed to incorporate best practices in language instruction as well as proficiency-based (standards-based) grading. It provides teachers with a practical tool to move away from traditional language teaching that does not give students useful skills when using language in the real world. Using the researched theories outlined in Chapter 2, along with performance assessments and proficiency-based grading, the focus moves further away from outdated teaching practices in the language classroom. In addition, by incorporating authentic sources into practice activities and performance assessments, students learn valuable cultural information alongside linguistic knowledge.

This curriculum was written using the paradigm Understanding by Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011), which incorporates backward design by planning assessments and evaluation (grading) first, then working backwards to classroom activities. The standards and performance descriptors created by ACTFL (2015) were also integral to creating this curriculum appropriate for a novice-mid language classroom. By looking at standards, learner objectives and assessments first, then incorporating classroom instruction and activities, an effective curriculum can be developed for any classroom.

In this section, I have outlined the rationale and paradigm used for this curriculum design. In the next section, I will explain the school setting in which this curriculum was created.

The School

The school intended to use this curriculum design is in a first ring suburb of a large metropolitan area in the Midwest. It is a high school grades 9-12. The high school is one of two high schools in the district. This curriculum could also be implemented in the other high school in the district, as well as any high school that uses the ACTFL standards for language learning.

Demographics

The high school serves over 1700 students. Almost 70% of these students are white, about 15% are Asian, and about 15% are Black, Hispanic, Native American or identify with two or more categories. Almost 8% of students receive Special Education services, and 1% are English language learners. Twelve percent of students receive free or reduced lunch and 92% of students pursue college after high school.

Instructional Time and Course Offerings

The high school has a daily schedule of six periods, 55 minutes each. On Wednesdays of a five-day school week, there is a study period of one hour between second and third period. All other classes are shortened by 10 minutes on these Wednesdays, besides fourth period which becomes a full hour to accommodate lunch time.

Students may choose to take a foreign language as an elective course, but it is not required by the school or the district. Many students choose to take two to four years of a language depending on their postsecondary plans. The high school offers Spanish, French, German, Chinese and American Sign Language classes. Only Spanish is taught

in the middle schools in the district, so a large number of students choose to continue with Spanish and start Spanish 2 in 9th grade. Most other students start a new language in their 9th grade year.

The Classroom Environment

The classroom in which this curriculum will be taught has many visual aids for novice language learners. The essential question for the current unit is posted clearly. There are essential verb conjugations posted, along with a word wall for relevant vocabulary. Some sentence starters are also included in the word wall.

In addition to the classroom itself, there are several breakout areas available to language students. There are two small spaces for a group of students that include a whiteboard and monitor. There is one large space with a variety of furniture and two whiteboards. There are also two small study rooms with whiteboards and a door that closes. These breakout areas allow for collaborative group work as well as opportunities for students to do different activities depending on their personal learning goals.

It is very rare that an educational assistant or paraprofessional is present in world language classrooms at our school. This depends on the needs of individual students. The class size can range from 12 to 38 students. Most years the size of the novice French class is between 18 and 30 students.

In this section, I have outlined the school setting of the curriculum design. The next section will outline the intended audience for this curriculum.

Audience

   The audience for this curriculum design is teachers of novice French learners with

no previous French experience, most in 9th grade. In the school for which the curriculum

was originally designed, there are also some students in grades 10-12 who have chosen to

take French from the beginning. This unit of study is intended to be the third unit of study

in the first year of French. Students are generally moving from Novice-Low learners to

Novice-Mid language learners at this stage. Teachers using this curriculum should take

into consideration the knowledge acquired before this unit of study, which is outlined in

the unit of study.

   In this section, I described the intended audience for this curriculum design. In the

next section, I will explain the outline and timeline for this project.

Project Outline and Timeline

   This curriculum design includes a unit of study on the theme of school. The

essential question for the unit is: *School in the U.S. or School in a Francophone Country?*

This unit is typically taught as the third or fourth unit of study in the novice classroom.

Basic vocabulary and pronunciation has been taught, as well as concepts central to

language learning: singular versus plural, masculine versus feminine and conjugating

verbs. Students will also have been introduced to the concept of cultural comparisons (as

outlined by ACTFL).

   Students will be able to complete the following learning targets at a level of

"proficient" or higher: express their opinions about their own classes, ask questions about

others' classes and schedules, describe daily and weekly school schedules, and compare

and analyze schools in Francophone countries to those in the United States. The components assessed in French from the Integrated Performance Assessment categories are Interpretive Listening and Interpersonal Speaking. There is also a cultural component assessed in English, based on the students' novice learner level.

This unit contains materials and assessments for three weeks of study. Assessments and rubrics were created first to properly align the teacher instruction and student activities. This unit plan uses comprehensible input strategies, an emphasis on communicative competence and authentic sources, integrated performance assessments (IPAs) and proficiency-based grading, as outlined in my literature review chapter. My curriculum design will use current best practices to create a unit that allows students to learn language and culture simultaneously. This ensures the effectiveness of the curriculum and targeted learning for students.

Summary

This chapter has described the rationale for the research question: *How do comprehensible input and proficiency-based grading affect language learning in the classroom?* I explained the paradigm and research used to create an effective language curriculum for novice learners. I also described the school setting in which this curriculum is intended to be implemented, as well as the students and teachers who could benefit from this curriculum. I outlined the assessments, instruction and activities used for this unit of study. Finally, I gave a timeline for this unit of study in the curriculum design.

In the next chapter, I will provide a conclusion to this capstone project, including a review of the literature and reflection on the curriculum writing process.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

Introduction

Throughout my teaching career, I have strived to find a way to make language learning fun, accessible and relevant to my students. While my methods have changed considerably over the years, my drive as a French teacher has remained constant: that each of my students is inspired to be a lifelong French learner. Through experience and professional development, I arrived at the question: *How do comprehensible input and proficiency-based grading affect language learning in the classroom?*

In this chapter, I reflect on my major learnings and revisit the literature; as well as discuss the implications and limitations of the project, future research and projects and the major communications and benefits to the profession.

Learnings from the Capstone Process

The process of completing the capstone project taught me a lot about myself as a student and a teacher. In this section, I will reflect on my learnings in each capacity.

As a student, I became a better researcher and writer. I have been interested in language learning since I began taking French in middle school. I enjoyed French class throughout middle and high school. In college, I learned about basic learning theories for my education major. In pursuing this degree at Hamline, I read a lot about language learning theory. It was not until this project, however, that I delved into both the theories and practical implications of language learning so connectedly.

As a teacher, keeping the practical classroom implications at the forefront of my thinking allowed me to analyze research in a more thoughtful and pragmatic manner. The research validated and expanded my theoretical and practical knowledge. I am now confident in my abilities to continue my personal and professional growth.

The next section will revisit the literature review, which explores my learnings related to my research question.

Revisiting the Literature Review

When writing the curriculum for this project, there were three vital components that most influenced the outcome. First, the research behind comprehensible input, especially by Krashen (1992) and Schulz (2006). Second, the use of Integrated Performance Assessments as developed by Adair-Hauck et al. (2006). Third and lastly, the philosophy and methods behind proficiency-based, also known as standards-based grading.

Comprehensible Input

One of my biggest shifts in pedagogy has been from a grammar- and vocabulary-focused classroom to one of comprehensible input. This takes the emphasis away from rote memorization activities and puts it on authentic sources and communication. Using the real world as context and authentic sources that meet the language learner at their level should be the crux of any world language classroom, taking the emphasis away from grammatical accuracy (Schulz, 2006).

Rodgers (2014) especially challenged my thinking - that just because a concept has been taught does not mean it has been learned. I have been guilty of ticking content

or grammar boxes and moving on without really checking for understanding or recycling the concept explicitly again. By using comprehensible input and its many classroom strategies, I am solidifying student learning in a way that is authentic to the world around them.

Integrated Performance Assessments

One of the ways to incorporate authentic sources and checking for understanding is by implementing Integrated Performance Assessments (IPAs) in place of traditional tests and quizzes. Adair-Hauck et al. (2006) underline the need for an assessment that thoroughly evaluates six components of language learning: Interpersonal Speaking and Writing, Presentational Speaking and Writing, and Interpretive Reading and Listening. By using real-world situations and authentic sources, we can accurately assess students' learning and understanding at their language level.

Proficiency-Based Grading

The last key component of the literature review that most impacted my project is proficiency-based grading. This method of grading should be meaningful in that it truly reflects the standards and allows students to show what they are able to do (Muñoz & Guskey, 2015). Students are aware of the grading process which allows them to take responsibility for their own learning. Proficiency-based grading also goes hand in hand with IPAs, which shaped the design of my curriculum.

The next section will discuss the implications of the project.

Implications of the Project

While this project is intended for French teachers with novice-mid students, this curriculum could also serve as an outline for other units of study in world language classrooms. In sharing this research and curriculum design with other language teachers, there is common language around world language curriculum design. Many schools have world language departments with multiple languages taught. By using the strategies and assessments outlined in this project, there is an opportunity for more cohesion in language departments as they develop meaningful curriculum that is engaging to students.

There is also an opportunity for teachers of other subjects to learn from this curriculum. In looking at assessment design, proficiency-based grading and the ownership it gives to students, many teachers could create curricula that implements best practices that apply to their individual classrooms.

I hope that this unit can not only create common language around curriculum design but also bring unity and alignment to world language departments and other teachers. The research and strategies presented in this project provide ample opportunity for outline and expansion. The next section discusses the limitations of the project.

Limitations of the Project

One limitation of this project is the depth of study having to be balanced with the language level of the students. While all of the interpretive sources used in the unit of study are authentic, the cultural knowledge usually remains superficial. While there are activities built in to allow students to reflect on cultural differences and implications,

their novice language level prevents them from studying sources that delve deeper into cultural products, practices and perspectives. Additionally, more time could be spent in English discussing these cultural implications to make up for the language level of the students.

Another limitation of this project is that it assumes much previous knowledge and skills on the part of the students. While this is clearly outlined in the curriculum, it may alter some lesson plans or cause teachers to rewrite units of study that precede the unit I created.

Next, I discuss potential future projects and research.

Future Research and Projects

This project focuses on novice-mid language learners. There is potential for more projects and curriculum to be created for intermediate and advanced language learners on a variety of subjects. There is also potential for more curriculum to be created using different themes and subjects for novice learners.

A potential research study could be to track learners who have used IPAs and proficiency-based grading versus learners in a classroom using traditional assessments and grading. A comparison could be done on the learners' ability to use their language skills in real-life settings.

Communicating Results

This curriculum will be shared with other French teachers in my school and district. I will use this model to expand my curriculum throughout all the French levels at our school. This unit will also be shared with French teachers across the country who can

implement it as-is or adapt it to their curriculum. In the final section of this chapter, I discuss the benefits to the profession.

Benefits to the Profession

I hope that my research and the unit of study I created bring cohesion and inspiration to French teachers and their other language teacher colleagues. First, teachers could immediately implement the unit of study in their novice French classrooms. Second, they could use the assessments, grading and other classroom strategies outlined as inspiration for further curriculum changes in multiple classes and levels. I believe that my project creates a tangible example of the theories and strategies that constitute best practices in modern language classrooms.

Summary

This chapter provided a summary and reflection on the research question: *How do comprehensible input and proficiency-based grading affect language learning in the classroom?* I reflected on my major learnings, revisited the literature, the implications and limitations of the project, future research and projects and the major communications and benefits to the profession. This project has inspired me to continually improve on my own teaching practices, moving farther away from the traditional practices I used at the beginning of my career. I hope to continue to create an environment that inspires lifelong language learning for all of my current and future students.

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