

How to Include All Learners in the Process of Second Language/Foreign Language¹ Teaching and Learning: Some Suggestions from Conducting Classroom Research

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Background

This is a long-term project in the area of Classroom Research and Experiential Learning in college major/minor programs that offer authentic communicative settings in language classes and employ task-based and content-based learning/teaching or “handlungsorientierter Unterricht”. It is designed to investigate the effects of current SL/FL learning and teaching activities on student performance and how these reflect American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) content standards of FL education or Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) standards for ESL education in the five major goal areas² and their specific content standards. In other words, are the teaching methods presently employed in SL teaching effective in bringing students to certain competencies? These interconnected “goal areas” emphasize the following points: 1. using the target language for communication with others, 2. gaining a deeper understanding of other cultures, and 3. accessing information in the target language more effectively and efficiently from a variety of sources, genres, and disciplines.³ In order to include all participants, i. e., facilitators, learners, stakeholders, and resources, an effective dialogue among all players in the language game must be fostered. This dialogue includes the complex and complicated, yet rewarding process of enhancing the quality of learning and teaching in the SL/FL context through careful planning, skilled instructional delivery, superb communication skills, ongoing classroom assessment techniques, shared collaborative activities, deep self-reflection, and trans-cultural leadership skills. Further, this classroom assessment project employing a variety of Classroom Assessment Technique (CAT)⁴ instruments represents a reflection on language courses within a sequence, i. e., over one or more years, for example German 1 (Beginning German 1), German 2 (Beginning German 2), and German 3 (Intermediate German 1) or ESL 1 (Beginning ESL 1), ESL 2 (Beginning ESL 2), and ESL 3 (Intermediate ESL 1). The effectiveness of Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs) on each student’s learning processes is perceived as a direct reflection of the instructor’s teaching performance. Therefore, accountability of the instructor and each individual learner is stressed. It is hoped that possibilities for future directions will be revealed through the systematic collection and interpretation of data on learners’ backgrounds, guided responses, and specific input from the various CATs, which are continually employed and interpreted in each complex, unique, and possibly complicated SL/FL journey.

¹ Hereafter referred to as: SL.

² The interdisciplinary standard framework for foreign language learning in terms of the five C’s of Communication, Cultures, Comparisons, Connections, and Communities is established by the National Standards for Foreign Language Education, which is a collaborative project of the ACTFL, American Association of Teachers of French (AATF), American Association of Teachers of German (AATG), American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP), American Classical League (ACL), American Council of Teachers of Russian (ACTR), Chinese Language Association of Secondary-Elementary Schools (CLASS), and the National Council of Japanese Language Teachers (NCJLT-ATJ); however, the proficiency guidelines of the ACTFL govern the competencies for the specific level of proficiency.

³ Examples of such fields are geography, anthropology, psychology, art, history, literature, political science, film studies, business, hospitality and management.

⁴ Angelo & Cross offer a wide array of CATs to instructors of all disciplines; as SL/FL facilitators, we need to modify, adapt, utilize, and interpret those CATs in each of our SL/FL classes.

The investigator does not imply that language acquisition and learning can be structured and/or manipulated by learning style inclination alone. Rather, language learning needs to be tuned to individual language learning sequences, i. e., linguistic sequences, interlanguage, learner grammar etc. This necessitates the integration of many different educational theories, processes, and tools in emphasizing the continuous development of learning skills through the use of assessment principles in order to produce learner-centered self-development, which represents a performance-based philosophy of education called Process Education^{TM5}.

The investigator's teaching and learning philosophy is significantly influenced by the "Assessment Model"⁶. This interactive learning model within the framework of Total Quality Control Management (TQCM) encourages reflective thinking and a high level of taking charge of one's own learning on the part of all participants – the instructor and the students – in interconnected teaching and learning scenarios.

The foundation for this approach to the investigator's teaching and learning was laid at the beginning of her career as an educator when she participated as a FL instructor (for German, French, and English-as-a-Second Language) in a grant-supported research project entitled "Assessment of Learning in Adult College Courses" at Fullerton College, CA⁷. There she became aware of the intricate processes and complex selection criteria involved in deciding when and how to solicit learner input in an anonymous fashion and how to assess not just students' learning but also her own teaching and learning on a regular basis. Since then, she has been conducting this type of classroom research in her FL/SL courses, adapting and refining her methodological techniques and classroom management skills by continuously revising and redesigning learner questionnaires and assessment sheets, soliciting learner input on a variety of pedagogical foci, classroom/homework activities, exercises, and content issues. The findings from each lesson and/or unit taught are used to ensure that the majority of her learners meet or exceed the specific Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) aligned with the Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs).⁸ In other words, by employing this approach, each communicative teaching scenario turns into a web of interconnected learning situations taking into consideration the specific background information of each individual learner (including skill levels and perceptual learning styles clusters), the instructor's dispositions, the setting, the methodology/approach, the content; other critical features that form part of the considerations are the unique configuration of each group of learners in the context of the overall program parameters, the curriculum, the teaching materials, and the national professional standards set forth by ACTFL, AATG, and TESOL. In order to enhance the quality of teaching and learning within the given parameters, each teaching scenario is followed by an assessment of the collected data (as evidence of effective teaching and efficient learning), a

⁵ See Corno, L., & Winne, P. H. (Eds.). (2004). Personal epistemology: Paradigmatic approaches to understanding students' beliefs about knowledge and knowing [Special Issue]. *Educational Psychologist*, 39 (1); Vygotsky, L. S. (2006). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, (Eds.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; and Zimmerman, B. J. (1998). Developing self-fulfilling cycles of academic regulation: An analysis of exemplary instructional models. In D. H. Schunk & B. J. Zimmerman (Eds.). *Self-regulated learning: From teaching to self-reflective practice* (pp. 1-19). New York: Guilford Press. The term "Process Education" is a trademark of Pacific Crest, <www.pcrest.com>.

⁶ See T. A. Angelo & K. P. Cross (1993), *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers* and T. A. Angelo (ed.) (1998), *Classroom Assessment and Research: An Update on Uses, Approaches, and Research Findings*.

⁷ This research was conducted under the auspices of the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE).

⁸ See W. O. Dick, L. Carey and J. O. Carey (2004). *The systematic design of instruction*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

deep reflection on the part of the facilitator and the learner, and an ongoing dialogue between all participants.

Method

The investigator has been obtaining anonymously more detailed information about the ongoing learning processes within each learning community over several semesters. Data gathering included ongoing Classroom Research, i. e., monitoring students' individual learning styles and learning strategies, including inventorying such strategies on the first day of each FL/SL course. The instructor also influenced students' learning styles and strategies in order to help them become more successful learners, i. e., interdependent but also self-guided as well as other-guided in acquiring techniques and strategies in language courses. In order to ensure a higher quality of learning and teaching inside and outside the classroom, as well as the findings from the weekly "Classroom Assessment Techniques" (CATs)⁹ have been forming an integral part in all German language courses at North Carolina Central University, i. e., German 1, 2, and 3, and previous to those in the ESL Writing classes at Loyola University, Chicago. In this classroom research, the findings from the CATs obtained have been shared and discussed regularly with the classes. The facilitator has been interpreting those findings in a continuous dialogue with individual class members as well as each FL/SL class. Based upon the outcomes in the dialogue phase, the instructor has been redesigning and/or rearranging the steps in the learning and teaching processes in order to better serve her students in the process of reaching their goal to use the target language for communication, to gain understanding of other cultures, and to access information in the target language from a variety of sources from different fields and genres more effectively and efficiently. No learning styles assessment, however, can give the final word on who a learner is and what a learner can and cannot do. The most reasonable way to approach any learning styles assessment is as a reference point rather than a label. Knowing where a learner is placed in terms of learning styles not only creates new paths and possibilities for each learner but also helps each learner see paths and possibilities that already exist. This provides learners with the power to explore, to choose, and to proceed with confidence.

Findings

Since each FL/SL course taught so far has been displaying unique findings based on each student's individual background, disposition, and perceived learning styles cluster, it presents a challenge to provide every detail in this article. What can be done, though, is to give examples of how PLOs were achieved by individual students and/or how a classroom dialogue maximized learning through the careful interpretation of the findings from the CATs. For example, one insight was that German-3 language students seem to have difficulties in producing the correct articles and case endings of German nouns. As an instructor, one could simply provide those students with the advice to review the vocabulary from previous units as displayed in the vocabulary lists following each chapter covered in German 1 or German 2. A better alternative to this approach could be as a true facilitator to simply ask learners to describe where they believe the problem lies. The following short questionnaire was distributed in a German-3 class in order to assess individual students' perceptions:

⁹ We have been using "interactive questionnaires" and "introspective activities," such as the "Background Knowledge Probe," the "Memory Matrix," the "Process Self-Analysis," and brief one-on-one interviews with the learners, as introduced by Angelo and Cross (1993) and modified and adjusted by the author.

Und noch eine kurze Frage:

Please check!

Have you ever faced difficulties when trying to determine the correct article or proper ending of a noun in a German sentence? ____ yes ____ no

If you checked YES, please answer the next question:

Which of these statements best describes the issues you face when trying to determine the correct article to use in front of a noun in a German sentence or the proper ending of a German noun?

Please check ONLY ONE ANSWER!

_____ I have difficulties remembering the gender of the noun.

_____ I have difficulties identifying the case of the noun.

_____ I know the case and gender of the noun but I have difficulties remembering the correct form of the article or the proper ending.

Based on the responses by individual students as well as a whole German-3 class, the instructor may provide activities and exercises that take into account individual Perceptual Learning Styles Inventories (PLSIs) and might assist learners in remembering the proper gender of a noun, the correct form of the article, the proper noun ending and/or in identifying the case.

As determined by the initial PLSI, a visual learner, for instance, could go back and highlight certain endings and/or articles in connection with German nouns in an authentic text, whereas an aural learner could listen to questions and answers that identify the nominative case as opposed to the dative and/or accusative cases. Similarly, an interactive learner could work with a partner on information gap activities that ask for German words with a certain gender or in a certain case, while a print-oriented learner could complete sentences using the proper articles and/or cases; a haptic learner might construct a matrix that categorizes certain nouns by the parameters of gender and case.¹⁰ The options and variations are endless. Needless to say, if each learner had been accustomed to maximizing his/her FL performance by focusing on his/her unique learning style and/or found a way of how to redirect his/her learning style to become more successful, serious issues – as they occur in an intermediate FL environment – could have been mitigated at a beginning proficiency level. This illustrates also how crucial it is for learners to complete a PLSI on the first day of any FL/SL course.

The following is an example of a modified PLSI from a German-3 class:

WILLKOMMEN ZU IHREM DEUTSCH-3-KURS!

Ihr Name: (_____) (**freiwillig**, das bedeutet, wenn Sie Ihren Namen angeben wollen, schreiben Sie ihn in das Feld zwischen (_____)!)

PERCEPTUAL LEARNING STYLES INVENTORY

Bitte haken Sie die 5 (FÜNF) Aktivitäten, Strategien oder Techniken ab (✓), die Ihnen beim Deutschlernen in diesem Kurs am besten helfen oder helfen können.

¹⁰ David Kolb introduced the classification into the seven perceived learning styles and the PLSI (D. A. Kolb, 1984). His PLSI was chosen because it presents a quick way to assess a learner's perceived learning styles. Alternatively, learners could also be asked to fill out a "Pathways to Learning" as developed by Joyce Bishop (reprinted in: C. Carter, J. Bishop, & S. Lyman Kravits, 2000, pp. 82f.).

BEISPIEL von (Monika Musterfrau):

1. motion pictures in German with English subtitles
2. lecture by instructor in German
3. pair-share activity in German
4. reading assignments in German
5. participant in role-playing activities in German
6. studying grammar tables in German
7. food sampling from the German, Austrian, and/or Swiss cuisines
8. television programs in German
9. audiotapes in German
10. participant in panel discussions in German

Das bedeutet:**5 (FÜNF) Aktivitäten, Strategien oder Techniken helfen der Studentin Monika Musterfrau in diesem Kurs am besten:**

- Nr. 1 – Spielfilme auf deutsch mit englischen Untertiteln,
 Nr. 3 – Partneraktivitäten auf deutsch,
 Nr. 6 – Grammatiktabellen auf deutsch,
 Nr. 8 – Fernsehprogramme auf deutsch und
 Nr. 9 – Tonkassetten auf deutsch helfen Monika Musterfrau besser als Nr. 2, Nr. 4, Nr. 5, Nr. 7 und Nr. 10.

· Nun sind Sie dran! Bitte haken () Sie Ihre **5 Aktivitäten, Strategien oder Techniken jetzt ab.**

1. motion pictures in German with English subtitles
2. lecture by instructor in German
3. pair-share activity in German
4. reading assignments in German
5. participant in role-playing activities in German
6. studying grammar tables in German
7. food sampling from the German, Austrian, and/or Swiss cuisines
8. television programs in German
9. audiotapes in German
10. participant in panel discussions in German
11. writing a dialogue in German
12. non-verbal/body movements, such as nodding or acting out motion verbs or commands in German
13. drawing as a response to a listening or reading comprehension activity in German
14. selecting the proper spices for an international dish
15. a multimedia slide show in German
16. songs in German
17. question-and-answer sessions in German
18. self-selected independent/pleasure reading in German
19. participant in physical games in German
20. creating a project on a cultural topic of choice
21. touching objects while studying vocabulary in German
22. studying a chart with various sentence patterns in German
23. recitations in German by others
24. interviews in German
25. writing a summary in your own words in German

26. ___ physical motion activities, such as moving to the rhythm of a German song
27. ___ scented materials (scratch & sniff)
28. ___ picture file with photographs and/or story boards while studying vocabulary in German
29. ___ lecture by instructor in English on a topic related to German
30. ___ pair-share activity in English on a topic related to German
31. ___ reading assignments in English on a topic related to German
32. ___ participant in role-playing activities in English on a cross-cultural topic related to German
33. ___ studying grammar tables for German in English
34. ___ television programs in English on a topic related to German
35. ___ writing a short poem (with guidance) in German
36. ___ audiotapes in English on a topic related to German
37. ___ German-speaking motion pictures in the dubbed English version
38. ___ interviews in English with a resource person from the German-speaking countries and/or from a German-speaking community
39. ___ Other: Please specify _____
40. ___ Other: Please specify _____

Vielen Dank!

Based on individual student learning preferences, as derived and evaluated from individual PLSIs and compared to all PLSIs of a learning community¹¹, a learner could be asked either to collaborate with a student or students of a similar perceived learning style or she/he could be asked to share his/her way of learning in a small group with learners of other preferred learning styles and/or learning styles clusters. For example, visual learners could benefit from more films, demonstrations, diagrams, time lines, pie charts, drawing arrows, and color-coding. Aural learners could benefit from discussion, prefer verbal explanation to visual demonstration. In this instance, rewriting notes, outlining chapters, reciting information or writing dialogues and debates represent student-suggested strategies. It is recommended to form groups with learners from the same preferred learning styles but also mix learners in groups in order to optimize collaborative learning in a FL/SL course.

Conclusions

The conventional role of the FL/SL teacher as the language expert that disseminates information in the target language by inputting is superseded. However, as a FL/SL teacher one detects a tendency to lecture to learners, i. e., to focus on the aural learners, rather than divide class time into activities and exercises that address equally the needs of all learners in a learning community, i. e., the FL/SL communicative classroom. In order to develop a deeper understanding for the learners that are *visual* (on the PLSI: 1, 8, 15 ...), *interactive* (on the PLSI: 3, 10, 17 ...), *print-oriented* (on the PLSI: 4, 11, 18 ...), *kinesthetic* (on the PLSI: 5, 12, 19 ...), *haptic* (on the PLSI: 6, 13, 20 ...), *olfactory* (on the PLSI: 7, 14, 21 ...), and/or *aural* (on the PLSI 2, 9, 16 ...), FL/SL teachers need to become knowledgeable in and comfortable with identifying and diversifying – without labeling – each learner's perceptual learning style/s/cluster. Furthermore, FL/SL instructors need to familiarize themselves with the

¹¹ It is essential for the success of the entire classroom research project as well the process of improving the quality of learning and teaching that each teacher/facilitator take the time to evaluate each LSI on an individual basis but also for an entire group of learners in order to make learning and teaching more effective and efficient.

intricate connections between meeting and/or exceeding prescribed PLOs in addition to meeting and/or exceeding SLOs within the framework of the target language proficiency standards. While this might be a challenge for someone who is not trained as a pedagogue or has had only minimal training in educational methods and approaches, it is indispensable to account for and include different styles.

The CATs described above in combination with the “Project Approach,” during which students are initiated into “Process Education™,”¹² can also be used in order to stabilize retention figures and/or monitor entire academic programs. “Process Education” includes, among others, brainstorming, clustering, branching, vocabulary-activation activities, pre-discussion activities, vocabulary-building activities, PowerPoint presentations, dictionary activities, focused grammar exercises, multiple drafts of shorter writings, listening activities to multiple variations of dialogues, and peer-editing activities within the FL/SL classroom. In fact, the “Classroom Assessment Approach” addresses the complex and increasingly complicated issues surrounding the relevance of certain foreign languages, the acquisition and learning FL/SL processes, the perceived images of certain languages and national/political cultures linked to a certain FL/SL, as well as the varying degrees of difficulty of FLs and SLs.

To sum up, more active research on the effects of specific classroom situations and assignments needs to be designed and conducted in order to maximize adequate learning and teaching, to sort out the complexity of each student’s/students’ as a learning community as well as the instructor’s backgrounds, and to identify the challenges to guarantee adequate progress, self-development, and growth. During this never-ending process, the roles of the individual learner, the individual instructor, small and large groups of different configurations, in-class and homework activities and projects continually need to be reassessed and evaluated.

Only if the complex, unique, and often complicated learning processes are laid open, will all participants – students as well as teachers – be provided with ample opportunity to reflect more thoroughly on their mutual experiential learning processes in order to involve themselves more actively in the ultimate learning process of becoming more responsible members of a learning community that exceeds the expectations so clearly prescribed in the SLOs

Therefore, creating a caring, supportive, lively, professional, yet academic learning environment at the college level, one in which all learners are able to succeed in learning and acquiring a FL/SL by viewing, listening to, gathering, discussing, reading, analyzing, comparing, categorizing, contrasting, and writing about relevant linguistic, cultural, academic, emotional, and professional information in relation to the “other” countries and their speakers and their home cultures and their representatives as well as artifacts should be every facilitator’s highest desideratum in the highly fascinating and continually changing contexts of FL/SL teaching and learning.

¹² This terminology and philosophy were introduced to participants during a Pacific Crest “Teaching Institute” held at Gaston College, NC, October 2008.

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