

LOTE and Its Many Faces
Paul Sabatino, President, NYSAFLT

Match Column A with the English Translation of Column B... And so began many a vocabulary test that determined how well students memorized the practice list of vocabulary given the day before the test. The results were a mixed bag of grades that spanned the gamut and allowed the teacher to praise and reward those whose memory served them well, and remind the others that they either had not studied enough and that if they did not do better on the next test, their overall grades would be affected. The teacher's action would prove to be justified because, in fact, on the next test mostly every student in the class would receive a laudable passing grade. The students were happy, the teacher was satisfied that the admonition had been effective in attaining the desired result.

Select the most appropriate choice to complete the context of the sentence... This time the students felt more comfortable, even those who had not gone home to memorize the list of new vocabulary presented in class the previous day. After all, the chances of getting some of the answers correct were mathematically certain. To everyone's pleasant surprise, the distribution of passing grades was clustered in the middle of the bell curve. The lesson had gone over well. The students had advanced to the next level of target language (TL) acquisition. Everybody was happy.

After reading the passage below, select the choice that best completes the statement or answers the question... Topical reading comprehension...now that really indicated proficiency, why, even teetering on mastery in the TL. The students could now begin to feel confident that they would be ready for the state exam at the end of the course. A few more reading passages,

vocabulary tests, homework assignments that mirrored the format of the weekly quizzes and tests, and the class would definitely be ready for the big day: the long-awaited, albeit still dreaded state exam that would prove to students and teacher that they had prepared well. For many of the students this would be their last year of TL studies. In September, TL 4 and TL 5 teachers would see a proportionately diminishing number of students enrolled in their upper level classes.

Ahhh...we offer college credit for our more advanced TL courses. Why, we teach the college curriculum and our textbooks are what one sees in the campus book store. Our students are ready to do college-level work. Paying for credits at a fraction of the cost of what college students are paying at the local college or university for the same course, and a chance to begin earning college credits while in high school are too enticing. Who could resist?

A large number of our graduates have experienced the rigorous AP curriculum, and have truly mastered the language and many of its syntactical nuances. Many of these same students will, most likely, opt out of any further TL study while in college. For many of them, the study of the LOTE started many years before, comes to a sudden and abrupt end. What happened? Did anything go wrong somewhere along the line? Didn't we prepare our students well enough? Didn't we stimulate interest in the subject matter? Were we not aware that something we could have done would have changed the course of events? Did we make the language learning relevant to the students' aspirations? Did we bother to inquire why we were presenting those specific lessons? What purpose did they have? What were the ultimate aims and objectives?

To find answers to these and other similar queries, we may have to trace the development of student second language learning back to the very beginning, when that first day of TL exposure triggered a plethora of positive feedback from our students: enthusiastic smiles,

youngsters attentively listening to every novel utterance, intent on not missing one syllable of the new tongue the teacher was speaking. The absolute eagerness and sincere interest in learning how to say something in a different language, to someone unaccustomed to it, sounded like chaotic chatter, but to us TL teachers and to our students, this was nothing less than a sublime symphony.

Ahhh...Mais où sont les neiges d'antan? (But, where are the snows of yesteryear? – François Villon). Our students today walk around the hallways of our schools and sometimes waltz into our classrooms with plastic appendages hanging from their ears and seemingly attached to some probes under their vests or jackets. Their ability to interact with their peers around the globe and communicate among themselves at lightning speed is a phenomenon that for many of us is as alien as some names of the high-tech machines and media they use: *iPods, iPhones, BlackBerrys, Treos, Smartphones, YouTube, Skype...*and so many others that it simply boggles the minds of the neophytes among us. And so, because these strange instruments interfere with, and don't really have a place in the lessons we so carefully planned, we immediately direct them to put away these gadgets and be ready for the serious work that foreign language learning requires. And yet, to our students, the use of these devices *IS* serious work!

Our students today instinctively know that the world that awaits them when they leave the hallowed halls of academia is going to challenge them and exact from them a brand new set of adaptation skills. For most of our kindergartners today, the job that awaits them has not yet been invented. It's up to us, their foreign language teachers, to expose them to the target language(s) and culture(s) they will need to learn in order for them to be able to compete in our global community. More importantly, we must be able to think of a new paradigm in our area of

studies if we want to point our students in a direction that will lead to a lucrative career and a happy, satisfying lifestyle.

We can begin by capitalizing on their native technological savvy. They love to communicate, so why not assign short- and long-term projects that include the use of portable technology? A homework assignment might be an oral exchange between our students and their peers in the TL country or a video conference conducted via *Skype* and copied so that their teacher and peers can view it in class the next day. This type of assignment can easily be adapted to any level of second language learning. At the lower levels, it can take the form of text messaging with a technopal across the ocean. In the upper levels, students can easily burn and exchange a CD or a DVD. Again, the imagination has no limit, and it behooves us to tap these wonderful resources.

We know that eventually the students will leave our classes and go out to seek jobs. Do we know what today's and tomorrow's employers want and seek from the candidates they interview for a position? It is very likely that any corporate firm our students will consider for a job will have some international human resources subdivision that favors the employment of those with foreign language and culture skills. Government sources from the U.S. Department of Commerce indicate that big-name conglomerates like Microsoft, IBM, ING, Apple, and many others that have offices all around the globe are more apt to hire local nationals because our own citizens lack the language and culture skills of the target country where these multinationals operate.

It may be in our students' best interest and the future direction of our area of studies to have a clear focus on what may be required of them and perhaps more importantly, of us as teachers of world languages and cultures. The local mom-and-pop corner grocery stores are

becoming, if they are not already, extinct. The Internet has helped us expand our immediate world and navigate through, and become familiar with, previously alien and uncharted frontiers. There are no longer any daunting obstacles to surmount. The world is, indeed, flat, and Thomas Friedman's homonym bestseller delves into this new reality. Never before has there been such a dire need to evaluate and assess our pedagogical practices and visions of how to best tailor our classroom methodology. The writing and reading skills of our students may not be enough to address the needs of today's and tomorrow's global community. A look into a different language learning paradigm may be in order soon, lest we find ourselves still wondering why the area of studies we consider, and rightly so, a crucial component of an educated cosmopolitan mind continues to be underestimated and considered superficiality, and expeditiously relegated in many of our schools.

Global industry wants human resources capable and ready to assimilate without much difficulty. A trip out of our own country suffices in order to realize how important other peoples consider the ability to speak and communicate effectively with others who speak a different language. Anywhere we go around the world, we are confronted with the reality that others not only speak English with proficiency and purpose, but are also keenly knowledgeable of our social, economic, and political systems. What degree of difficulty will these individuals have in assimilating our own set of rules and guidelines?

I believe that it is time to monitor and address these issues via our mission as world languages emissaries. The world around us is changing at breakneck speed, and we need to acknowledge that this change is percolating down to the very lessons we provide daily to our students. Adopting new visions will help us tweak our mission to address those classroom elements that not only will keep our students interested in our area of studies, but more

importantly, it will send the message to our own communities that the study of other languages and cultures has social, economic, and political purpose. By extension, this same message will thus be conveyed exponentially to the global community: Our graduates are, in fact, ready to enter and compete in the world arena.