From Drill to Performance: Twofold Shifts in Design

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Introduction

World language teachers with either little or substantial historical remove from their pre-service methods course often return to graduate coursework incapable of recognizing any disconnect between their classroom practice and what the standards (National Standards in Foreign Language Education project, 1999/2006) entail for performance assessment. In spite of generous class discussion on the standards and tests on their knowledge of the five key areas in the profession, communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities, teachers still believe that they "do" the standards. They most often misunderstand the communication standard, which is considered the most important in a language class. Teachers claim their students speak in class all the time.

The communication standard (ACTFL, 1996/1999; National Standards, 1999/2006) is composed of three modes: interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational. This standard should determine the assessment task and the performance evidence (Eddy, 2007). By design, these modes move the learner from rote, memorized skills to authentic performance. Moreover, as a summative assessment, the Integrated Performance Assessment (IPA) (Adair-Hauck, 2006; Glisan, et. al., 2003) cycles the three mode tasks around a theme, each task motivated by the previous, using culturally authentic materials. At each step, there is a feedback loop between the teacher and students, so that the students understand what they know, what they are able to do, and what areas need improvement toward the performance goal. These tasks help the students use language flexibly in new, real-life situations other than within the context they were previously taught (Eddy, 2007; McTighe & Wiggins, 2001/2005).

Many teachers misunderstand the communication standard. From the inception of the standards in 1996, many teachers enter the profession with the knowledge that the standards exist, but without the tools necessary in designing for them. For many teachers, pre-service methods courses focus on the technical aspects of teaching, basic content pedagogy skills, and classroom management. They often passively receive this content and work at a school placement site with a mentor who may or may not understand performance-based tasks that align with the communication standard. Many teachers believe their textbook is the curriculum, but these books do not guide teachers in the design of performance assessments. Classroom practice as well as assessment offer predictable prompts and formulaic mastery drills that present language decontextualized and in isolation (Adair-Hauck & Pierce, Glisan, & Foltz, 1998; Sousa, 2000; Wiggins, 1998). A review of lesson plans reveals that choral repetition counts as speaking in the classroom, thus fulfilling the communication standard.

Well-intentioned teachers rush to build activities around these barren exercises that may be engaging but not effective in meeting the goals of the communication standard. Without specific inquiry into what these performance tasks should look like and critical analysis of their tasks and response to student work, there is no awareness or

embrace of standards-based performance assessment. Most teachers were not taught to think like an assessor (McTighe & Wiggins, 2004). Well into their graduate work, language teachers see instruction and assessment as distinct entities. Furthermore, they expect to be passive receptors of knowledge and skills again, seeing themselves as coaches of drill and transmitters of facts rather than facilitators who are responsive to student performance. Thus, the graduate course needs to engage this shift in their relationship with design, moving away from teachers as inert consumers (Miller & Pine, 1990; Williamson, 1992) of rote content to critical, flexible, and creative educators. If they envision their students being able to change from passive, habitual routines in their language class, the shift needs to happen with the teacher first. The process is as empowering as it is revealing (McKay, 1992); in becoming an assessor of performance, the teacher realizes that his or her work can effect immediate change.

Method

To initiate the aforementioned shift in the graduate class, teachers engaged in a three-step process. First, teachers responded to various statements in world language education literature as they pertain to performance assessment and the communication standard. Through systematic inquiry (McCutcheon & Jung, 1990), they identified an issue or problem on assessment practices, materials, and instruction (Schleppegrell & Bowman), 1995, and used this issue as their line of inquiry in dialogue and action planning to revise their assessment system (Bailey, 1996). Teachers worked in pairs or small groups, particularly if they taught at the same school. They discussed what language performance looks like outside of the classroom, their responses to the statements, and their chosen issue with regard to assessment practices.

Next, they brought samples of student work and their assessment plan for a given unit. They critically examined student work to see whether it was assessed for one of the communicative modes or whether it was merely drill/mastery. The assessment plan was evaluated on how closely the tasks for the unit aligned with real-life language use, strategies, and authentic performance. Teachers analyzed their assessment system with the communicative modes of the standards, fine-tuning tasks, moving them closer to the goals of the standard, and creating new integrated performance assessments as summative tasks. It is at this point that they were fully engaged in design, active in determining desired results (Wiggins, 1998), and making informed decisions.

Then for the rest of the semester, teachers used their revised assessment plan with a variety of performance assessment tasks in their classrooms. They used student work and the ongoing feedback loop (Adair-Hauck, 2006) to inform their instruction. Teachers became reflective practitioners, constantly planning to adjust, and being responsive to student performance and the kind of instruction needed for the assessment.

Analysis

The teacher responses to the statements on performance assessment and the communication standard are sorted to identify recurrent issues, misunderstandings, and inconsistencies. The teachers chose issues uncovered in their responses and examined these issues throughout the semester. In group discussion, the line of inquiry revealed further questions and problems with the communication standard, which indicated a misunderstanding of the standard, not recognizing it as the backbone of the assessment

system. Teachers were unable to describe what a performance task in each of the modes looked like, had difficulty distinguishing drill/mastery from authentic communicative tasks, and could not speak to key characteristics of the modes. Teachers began to question their routines (Grossman, 1992), thereby becoming empowered in the process of self-critical inquiry and intent on understanding this standard, which would enable change in the way they looked at assessment and instruction.

Examination of assessment tasks and student work samples revealed grammar in isolation, low-level drill, repetition of the same item test type, predictable oral tasks, lack of critical thinking tasks, and projects that did not demonstrate a real-life purpose or context for its use, for example, when students pick a country and do a poster or oral report. Moreover, when the assessments were categorized, teachers were shocked to see that the majority of their assessments were drill/mastery tasks, not at all focused on performance within the communication standard. They realized that these tasks did not address all learners. Teachers admitted that they did not use these tasks to inform and improve student progress. Furthermore, this powerful analysis revealed that they did not understand performance assessment. They were immediately motivated to change.

The revision of their assessment tasks and the subsequent reflection demonstrated problem solving, engagement with key issues, and transformative opportunities that this level of inquiry can bring. Teachers used their revised assessment tasks in their classes, reported positive results, and all the while adjusted their instruction in response to learner feedback. They also saw this type of research as immediately beneficial to their practice, co-constructed by them and the performance of their students. It was a departure from the usual "sit and get" of other courses, writing and researching for someone else. Free from intellectual dependence, teachers redefined themselves from being passive receptors to critical and responsive teachers. They were able to make that same shift in their classrooms, moving students from mechanical drill not indicative of true performance to tasks that require self-selection, negotiation, flexibility, autonomy, and critical thinking.

From drill to performance

Consider the following questions to reflect on performance criteria: What are key indicators of true performance? What do your assessment tasks ask students to do? Do they require the learner to adjust with a flexible repertoire or are they predictable? What products or performances would learners likely encounter or need to do in a given culture?

Many world language teachers plan for drill practice rather than planning for performance. These are repeat item drills on the same type or function, without engaging the flexibility required when using the language for its actual purpose encountered in the target language culture. Drills have their place, but they can never be confused with tasks designed for performance (Eddy, 2006). When the teachers categorized their tasks, they examined three major groups: drill/mastery, performance-like, and performance. Drill exercises are out of context, discrete and isolated, unrealistically set up and prompted. Performance tasks are real tasks or problems one solves when using the language in a real situation. They are in context, with all its messiness and interest value. They require a repertoire, used wisely and self-selected, that promotes autonomy for the learner. These tasks have few or no prompts; the learner judges what to do and when. The more prompts

and cues, the less the task resembles what is expected in real life and is not quite authentic performance level.

Drills on one particular area of knowledge or skill are not indicative of how the person will actually perform when he or she is in the actual setting and "doing" a given situation in real life. The result is a student who can answer only questions posed in a predictable, scripted manner, which is unrealistic in authentic communication.

The communication standard is clear: these assessment tasks in the three modes enable students to use the language in real situations when the interchange is not scripted. Success requires flexibility when situations arise, and the learners can use their repertoire in contexts never before encountered. Getting them there is not an accident; it requires assessment tasks that are more authentic as they move closer to the goal. Assessments must bring learners to contexts they are unfamiliar with and must deal with in the real world (Eddy, 2006).

The three modes in the communication standard, interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational, are the framework for designing performance assessments, the evidence by which teachers can truly see whether students are moving closer to the goal. None of these modes focuses on discrete-point drill practice. Instead, they require the student to do something with the language and use it in a different way from how it was originally presented.

Culturally authentic materials made by and for the culture provide context for the interpretive mode tasks. Students categorize information from the materials and discover cultural and/or linguistic meaning by listening, reading, and viewing. They experience the material in its actual context and with the same strategies people use when reading signs or menus, or listening for key information on the news or in a song. They learn to focus on exactly what they need from a piece, which is what we all do in real life. Active negotiation of meaning and solving information gaps via spontaneous, unrehearsed speaking tasks characterize the interpersonal mode.

In the presentational mode, students have time to consult resources, develop, and present an oral or written piece that has value or use to a culture. When teachers revised their tasks, it was here that an empty task on posters of countries and encyclopedia facts changed to a meaningful assessment involving problem solving and a repertoire of skills: a country brochure for a target audience, including interesting and useful tips and sites of interest to a family of four, businesspeople, grandparents, or students on a budget. Integrated performance assessment also responds to learner diversity, learning styles, multi-sensory instruction, and multiple intelligences (Hall Haley, 2004; Gardner, 1983/1993), as well as problem-identification, self-assessment, and reflection (Legutke & Thomas, 1991).

Through this inquiry, analysis, and design process, teachers see that performance tasks as indicated in the communication standard require collaboration, autonomy, negotiation of meaning, and ongoing feedback from the teacher on performance goals. This standard does not advocate learning in isolation, linguistic or otherwise, but involves students and teachers in their learning, promoting active decision making, problem solving, critical thinking, and self-directed learning. The shift from drill to performance intrinsic in the communication standard aligns with the move from structural focus on form and subsequent instruction and matches constructivist, content and task-based language learning (Nunan, 2004). This process facilitates the shift from a world language

teacher who consumes and tells knowledge and facts for a test to one who is a researcher, learner, designer, collaborator, and assessor of performance. In discovering this for themselves, teachers can foster the qualities of a self-directed, flexible, life-long language learner.

Conclusion

This action research component in the graduate program of world language education facilitates two key shifts; one is for the teachers on critical analysis of assessment design within the standard and their relationship to the design process. The other is the result of the first, changing the students from passive consumers of facts for drill to flexible language learners. Initial findings from teacher feedback are encouraging. Further research and development of materials continue, with teachers developing a database of performance assessments.

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