Seven Best Practices for the Foreign Language Classroom[1]

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Abstract: In foreign language teaching, discussion of "best practices" allows instructors to constantly be self-reflective in their teaching. We can all benefit from the successes (and failures) of other instructors. This article covers the seven best practices I have come across in my experience as a foreign language instructor: using the ACTFL assessment tools, understanding students' learning styles, relying on variation of proficiency levels in group work, teaching grammatical concepts, using the target language, integrating culture, and providing effective feedback.

Introduction

In over a decade of foreign language tutoring and teaching, I have had the privilege to meet and observe many exemplary foreign languages instructor at both the grade school and university levels, while teaching French, German, and Spanish at the high school level, and all levels of Italian and Spanish at the university level. I have also had the pleasure of working with several different programs, each with different ideas on how foreign languages should be taught.

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I have outlined here the seven most important practices that I have encountered through discussion and observation in my time teaching foreign languages.

1. ACTFL assessment tools

The term "assessment" has become an unwelcome word at many universities and in many language departments during the past several years. Many foreign language instructors have lamented to me that it is a way that administrators (most often with very little or no knowledge of second language acquisition or pedagogy) at state and institutional levels arbitrarily let instructors know if they are doing their jobs.

In the case or foreign language assessment, though, I believe that the American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has made the foreign language instructor's job much easier through their guidelines. The guidelines allow the instructor to set out a measurable goal for the students at the beginning of the semester, students to know what is expected of them, and departments to ensure that they are graduating students who have achieved a predetermined level of proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. For example, some universities require students to have an Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), present a composition written for one of their upper-division classes, and attain at least an Advanced-Low rating in both speaking and writing in order to graduate. ACTFL provides an excellent opportunity for programs to perform individual self-assessment and determine whether and how the program needs to be modified to ensure graduates are meeting the desired proficiency level. As a best practice, I encourage all foreign language instructors to become familiar with ACTFL's guidelines and to use them in the classroom. For example, instructors can put something like the following in their syllabi:

Course Goal

By the end of SPA 201, students will have reached a level of Intermediate-Mid speaking as defined by the ACTFL guidelines:

> Able to handle successfully a variety of uncomplicated, basic, and communicative tasks and social situations. Can talk simply about self and family members. Can ask and answer questions and participate in simple conversations on topics beyond the most immediate needs; e.g., personal history and leisure time activities. Utterance length increases slightly, but speech may continue to be characterized by frequent long pauses, since the smooth incorporation of even basic conversational strategies is often hindered as the speaker struggles to create appropriate language forms. Pronunciation may continue to be strongly influenced by first language, and fluency may still be strained. Although misunderstandings still arise, the Intermediate-Mid speaker can generally be understood by sympathetic interlocutors. (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language)

This statement allows both the teacher and students to quantify the goals of the course. ACTFL provides formal training for certification in conducting official assessments, but instructors can easily familiarize themselves with the guidelines. Many institutions have staff who know ACTFL's guidelines and could hold a workshop to introduce other faculty to them.

2. Student learning styles

Another best practice I have observed in foreign language classrooms is the instructor's recognition of students' different learning styles. As discussed by Felder and Henriques (1995), students are usually dominant as visual, aural, or kinesthetic learners. As instructors, we tend to teach in the learning style in which we were taught or in the learning style in which we receive our optimum input. This may create a mismatch between some of the students and the instructor. Instructors should be able to tailor each lesson in order to ensure that at least a portion is devoted to each learning style so that each student can receive his or her optimal input for some of the

lesson. For example, watching a video clip in the target language (TL) would provide input for both the visual and aural learners. Then, a discussion as a class or in groups would be optimal for the aural learners. Finally, a group activity would target the kinesthetic learners. I have found that group discussion (that actually targets all learners, especially ones who may be more introverted) really allows for student development as long as the instructor monitors the discussions and ensures that the groups are comprised of students with different levels of ability in the TL, as discussed below.

3. Variation of proficiency levels

Having all of the students in a single class at the same skill level by the end of the semester is a challenge—one that I must admit may not be possible. However, as a best practice that stems from group interaction, Lightbrown & Spada (2006, p 191) show that students learn from each other's mistakes (and they gain far more practice in speaking in groups than as a full class). Therefore, it is important that the groups be of mixed proficiency levels so that, for instance, if possible, a group has an Advanced speaker who has studied abroad, two Intermediate speakers, and a Novice-High speaker, rather than a group of three Advanced students who have studied abroad. This applies to lower-level classes as well and, coincidently, is one of the most difficult parts of a foreign language instructor's job: dealing with the wide variety of skill levels in the same class. It depends on the individual class, but each student has had different preparation and oftentimes the placement tests are quite broad in placing students.

4. Grammatical concepts

How to teach grammar in the second language classroom has been the focus of much of the second language acquisition research in the last 70 years, and if you ask 10 instructors how to

do it, you will get 11 answers. I am not writing this to incite a theoretical discussion (should it be implicit or explicit), but one aspect is clear: Most students I have come across have a disturbingly inadequate knowledge of how *English* grammar works. For example, if an instructor chooses to explain direct objects in Spanish, compound past tense auxiliary selection in French and Italian, or case in German, the students are often completely lost and learn what they can through learning heuristics in order to pass the requisite test. French, German, and Italian have a grammatical system that is called split-intransitive. It is manifested via the selection of either the verb "to be" or the verb "to have" as the auxiliary verb in the compound past constructions. The following examples in French and Italian demonstrate this split-intransitivity:

(1) a. Pierre **a** lu le livre (French)

Pierre has read the book

Pierre has read the book.

  b. Marc **est** mort

Marc is died

Marc died.

(2) a. Piero **ha** letto il libro (Italian)

Piero has read the book

Piero has read the book.

  b. Marco **è** morto

Marco is died

Marco died.

In examples (1a) and (2a), the verb *lire/leggere* "to read"' has selected the "to have" AUX, while in (1b) and (2b) the verb *morir/morire* "to die" has selected "to be" as its AUX. Using the incorrect AUX in the above examples would render the utterance ungrammatical:

(1)   a.   *Pierre **est**   lu   le   livre   (French)

                    Pierre is   read   the   book

                    Pierre has read the book.

        b.   *Marc **a**   mort

                    Marc has   died

                    Marc died.

The same would be true if the alternative AUX were used with the Italian examples (i.e., *è letto and ***ha** *morto*).

Because most verbs select the "to have" AUX, some instructors simply give mnemonics to their students to remember which verbs take the "to be" AUX (e.g., in French DR AND MRS VANDERTRAMP or in Italian RUN TED SAVE PAM are acronyms for some of the most common verbs that select the "to be" auxiliary). I am not advocating explaining split-intransitivity in its full form to students (even we linguists don't fully understand it), but I have seen teachers make hasty generalizations that the verbs that take the "to be" auxiliary are motion verbs. While many of them may be, the verbs "to be born" and "to die" are not motion verbs and take the "to be" auxiliary in French and Italian (as in the examples above). The higher the course level, the more detail I introduce. [2] [3]

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[2] On this note, I am a strong advocate of teacher preparation programs requiring a course in second language acquisition and pedagogy of teaching for their language(s); I am astounded at the number of programs that do not have such courses, or, they do, don't require them. These courses are crucial for teachers to have an open forum to discuss methods for teaching grammatical concepts and to understand those concepts better themselves.

5. Target language (TL) usage

Using the TL as much as possible in (and out of) the classroom is a very important best practice. On the first day of the first upper-division Spanish course I was required to take, one of my undergraduate instructors told my class that we should speak Spanish to him in the hallways and during office hours and write any e-mails to him in Spanish. I know an instructor who played a game in her classes: A student who said a word in English had to stand until another student said a word in English and took his or her place. I am certain that after an amount of time the instructor would allow a student to sit and would probably also allow for borrowed words and brand names to be in English.[4]

Another best practice I have seen is that of instructors who are very skilled at altering their vocabulary to match the course level. For example, in a lower-level course I may use just the word for "tree" in a language, but in upper-division courses I would use the more descriptive hyponym "pine," "oak," or "maple." Therefore, if a student asks what a word in the TL means, rather than reverting to English, the instructor can use both gesture and description to explain the word. To extend the exercise, the instructor can give the antonym. This is helpful in that it can exponentially maximize the students' working vocabulary. For example, if the instructor uses the Spanish word *picante* ("spicy"), a student may ask, "¿Cómo se dice *picante* en ingles?" The instructor could then describe, in Spanish, what it means to be spicy or the types of food that are spicy. After the student understands that *picante* means "spicy," the instructor could then take the opportunity to teach the students an antonym of *picante*: *suave* ("bland").

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[3] For a more thorough discussion teaching second language (L2) grammar, see Lee and VanPatten 2003 especially chapters 6 & 9.

[4] The downside to this would certainly be the fear that introverted students would have of speaking.

Another example: If the instructor uses the word in Italian for "tree," *l'albero*, a student may ask "Come se dice *l'albero* in inglese?" The instructor could then describe, in Italian, what a tree is—it's brown and green; many of them have leaves; we can use them to make paper—and then the instructor can point to one outside. Since an antonym isn't available in this case, the instructor can remind students (or teach them) that the word *l'albergo* means "hotel." Just one letter difference. Again, this is increasing students' vocabulary exponentially all while remaining in the TL.

Another issue in using the TL is using natural language. I remember when I had my first conversation with someone from Germany, and she said in German that I "sounded like a book." Some best practices that I have seen to combat this is for teachers to incorporate slang in the classroom. For example, in French *nickel* and *trop* are currently being used in colloquial speech to mean "perfect" or "great." For exposure to natural language, technology can be a great help. A German professor I know uses Skype in the classroom to talk with friends from Germany. Also, YouTube has some excellent videos for exposure to natural language. For example, the following video could be beneficial in an introductory classroom: "Easy German Vol. 1" (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_NXDM9XXhQ4&feature=fvw). The video includes German speakers who went around the streets of Germany to greet people. It is both spoken and subtitled in German; through context clues and gestures, the students can pretty easily follow along with what is happening. This—and other videos like it—would be great to show when students are learning German greetings.

In addition to using technology[5] to bring natural language into the classroom, inviting a native speaker in provides an excellent opportunity for the students to improve their listening and

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[5] Technology can play an integral role in second language learning. Oftentimes, the students work with this if there is a lab component, but there is a plethora of Web sites to help practice verb conjugation and vocabulary. About.com

speaking skills. Not telling the students anything about the speaker beforehand allows the students to have the chance to interview him or her for the first part of the class. Then, the floor can be opened for the native speaker guest to ask questions to get to know them better. If at all possible, instructors could invite native speakers from various professions to show the students that speaking a foreign language can be beneficial in many fields, as conversational abilities in foreign languages on a résumé look very attractive to many employers.

6. Culture

Language and culture go hand in hand, and I stress to the students that they cannot be separated. To fit into a language community, students must have an excellent grasp of the culture of the people, which is why promoting study abroad is so important.

Many of the textbooks over the past few decades have done a much better job of integrating culture than their predecessors. I have seen many textbooks that start the chapter with a conversation, a grammar lesson, and then some exercises with small cultural notes throughout and a themed cultural lesson at the end. However, that spattering of cultural notes can be rather random. Many instructors seize the opportunity to hold a cultural discussion, which is certainly a best practice. In one of my Italian classes, I asked the students in Italian if, on a date, the man or the woman should pay when going to dinner. They had a good laugh, and then I was able to (1) give them an idiomatic expression in Italian *alla Romana*, meaning "going Dutch" and (2) explain to them that in Italy (and much of Europe) children live at home until they are married. They then perked up and asked about driving (I explained that it is quite expensive to get a driver's license in most of Europe) and then about the Vespa, and then about the drinking age.

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has excellent resources for learning other languages. Many sites connect pen pals that students can write to and report back to the class on.

Many of the instructors I have worked with happily depart from their lesson plan to have the fruitful impromptu discussion as long as it stays in the TL, but there is a point where the instructor has to draw the line. For example, when lower-division students just begin to speak in English and continue to ask follow-up questions to avoid moving on with class work, the instructor might consider stopping the conversation and moving back to the lesson plan.

7. Feedback

The single most important best practice that I see in the classroom is the process of how an instructor gives feedback. Learning a second language requires negative evidence; learners need to be made aware (either explicitly or implicitly) that a structure they have used is not correct. The need for negative feedback is one way in which second language acquisition differs from first language acquisition.[6] I make it a point in my classroom never to say the word "no" and then correct the student (the correction is called a recast). Saying "no" or "don't say that" can discourage many students from participating in the classroom—in other words, negative feedback doesn't need to be a negative experience for the student. The theoretical evidence for my practice comes primarily from conversation analysis (CA)[7] (especially focusing on politeness theory).

When someone makes an error, there is a preferred order if a correction is needed. The following is in the hierarchical form for preferred corrective measures, with the most preferred on the left and the least preferred on the right:

self-initiate self-correct>other-initiate self-correct>other-initiate other-correct

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[6] See Gass &Selinker (2008) for an overview.
[7] See Ellis & Barkhuizen (2005), especially chapter 9, for a discussion of CA in second language acquisition. For a general overview, see work by Stephen Levinson, Harvey Sachs, or Emanuel Schegloff.

So, for example, John took Spanish a few years ago with Professor Smith and Mary was in his class; they are talking with Suzie, who is asking about which Spanish professor to take:

(3)   John: Suzie, you should take Professor Jones; he was very good.

Following are some possibilities for correcting John's utterance:

(4)   a.   John: Not Professor Jones--I meant Professor Smith. (self-initiate, self-correct)

        b.   Mary: Professor *Jones*?

                John: Oh, yeah, I had Smith. (other-initiate, self-correct)

        c.   Mary: You didn't have Jones; you had Smith. (other-initiate, other-correct)

As we move down the hierarchical structure, the form becomes less and less preferred because speakers disprefer others pointing out their errors, especially when, given the time, they can recognize and repair those errors on their own.

Often when an instructor overtly corrects a student (as in the following), the interaction is a very dispreferred structure and will result in the possibility of a negative psychological reaction on the student's part. They may begin to hold back on participation for fear of embarrassment. Consider the following in German:

(5)   Student: *Ich will zu Hause gehen. ("I want to go home.")

The example in (5) is ungrammatical in German because of the preposition *zu*; with *Hause* ("house"), the preposition and noun form an idiom (*zu Hause*) meaning "at home" instead of "to home," which is the intended meaning. The student may catch the error and self-initiate self-correct:

(6)   Student: Ach, ich will nach Hause gehen.

The utterance in (6) is the corrected form of (5). However, an alternative might be for the instructor to get the student to self-correct:

(7)   Student: *Ich will zu Hause gehen.

        Instructor: Du willst *zu* Hause gehen? (with a stress-rising pitch on *zu*
                        to indicate uncertainty)

The goal for examples like (7) is for the student to realize the error and produce—on his or her own—the corrected form. Finally, there is the least preferable recast:

(8)   Student: *Ich will zu Hause gehen.

        Instructor: Nein, man sagt auf Deutsch, "Ich will *nach* hause gehen."
                        ("No, one says in German, 'I want to go home.'")

This is very explicit correction (other-initiate, other-correct) and is the most dispreferred structure. If the student cannot produce the correct form, though, the instructor may have to more overtly correct the student. However, a less explicit way of correcting the student might be to phrase the correction as something like *Ach, ich verstehe aber...* ("Ah, I understand, but...") before beginning a grammatical explanation or something like *Ach, ich will auch nach Hause gehen* ("Ah, I also want to go home") to provide the correct form without explicitly telling the student, "No, you were wrong."

Another method is to recast in the form of a question. An example is an interaction I have had numerous times in Spanish:

(9)   Student: *Me gusta mirar a la televisión. ("I like to watch TV.")

The utterance in (9) is ungrammatical because of the inserted *a* ("at," which is already encoded in the verb *mirar* "to look at")—a common mistake for beginning speakers of Spanish. My recast typically looked like the following:

(10)   ¿Te gusta mirar la televisión? También me gusta mirar la televisión.
(Do you like to watch TV? I like to watch TV, too.")

I would then ask other members of the class questions that elicited the same construction to implicitly teach students the correct form.

I hope that foreign language instructors continue to realize the value of collaboration and sharing best practices. I always look forward to hearing from teachers about their best practices, sharing ideas for activities and assignments, and self-reflecting on what is and is not working in the classroom.

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