



# Reaching Every Student *in the Classroom through* Alternative Assessments

How can we as foreign language educators effectively modify our instruction and assessment for students with special needs?

Looking at the results of two action research projects conducted in a German and Spanish language classroom, we see that both students with and without special needs perform better when there are alternate assessments such as Total Physical Response (TPR). Students with special needs can excel and at times even outperform those students without special needs when options are given to them.

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## Planning

One topic which seems to receive too little attention in foreign language education today is that of differentiated instruction and assessment in the foreign language classroom.

As language educators, we all want to accomplish reaching the national standards by being able to teach all students, yet we fall short of the challenge of reaching every student in the classroom. It has been frustrating for both of us to use research-based techniques learned in our graduate courses to create the most equitable classroom possible in terms of education and socialization and yet have varied assessment results. It has also been frustrating to see few or no adaptations for different learners being made in various content classrooms.

When beginning this project, we wanted to research and talk to other foreign language educators about their experiences and ideas for change to prepare us. We soon found that there is little research and work that has been done on differentiated instruction and assessment in the foreign language classroom. We both have very diverse types of learners in our classes and want to make sure that

we fairly instruct and assess all students based on their abilities and needs. We want to make the appropriate accommodations necessary for all students.

For the purpose of this project, we define accommodations as “reasonable modifications to an assessment instrument or their administration made to compensate for the effects of a qualified disability without altering the purpose of the assessment instrument.”

In this article, we look at two classes taught in two different languages at two different age levels and schools. The first class, taught by Johanna, was a high school German I class with five students. All of the students had special needs, despite the fact that only three out of the five had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). There were four ninth grade students and one junior in the class. These students had all taken German since it was first offered to them in fifth grade. They all needed another year to review German I before moving on to German II.

The second class, taught by Kristin, was a sixth grade middle school Spanish I class with 15 students. Five out of the 14 students had special needs and all of the students were true beginners in Spanish.

## Acting

Because of the high number of students with special needs in both of our classes, we take differentiated instruction into account for our lessons, create adaptations, and consider various ideas in order to accommodate our students. As new teachers, we are often challenged to find new adaptations to make. As foreign language educators, teaching new lessons to non-native speakers, we are constantly making changes and thinking of ways to present the language and culture in various ways. Our coursework and co-workers do provide some assistance, but turning to the students for their input is most important to us. They know how we can more fairly assess and instruct them, which is why this project is so relevant, easily accessible, and naturally occurring.

In order to compare two classes at two different schools in two different languages, we needed to coordinate our instruction and assessments. Therefore, we designed a mini-unit on soccer together. To explore our options for making accommodations for our unit before beginning the project's lessons, we polled our students for their suggestions. We asked each student to complete two sentences: *I learn best by \_\_\_\_\_ and My teacher should \_\_\_\_\_ to help me on a test.* We wanted to keep this student poll simple so that the students would feel comfortable sharing their ideas. [Note: The answers to these questions are noted in Appendix A on the ACTFL Web site. Go to "See It in the Language Educator?" at <http://www.actfl.org>.]

To examine the effectiveness of our ideas and the suggestions of our students, we decided to concentrate on three major accommodations in our instruction and assessment of the students. First, we decided that we would teach the students the 20 new vocabulary words through TPR, or Total Physical Response. In TPR, a specific gesture or movement is given for each new vocabulary word. We taught five new gestures per day. After five days of learning the gestures, the students were assessed through an individual listening-based TPR quiz. In this quiz, the teacher would say a word and the student would perform the gesture for the word. [The results can be seen online in Appendix C. To compare the TPR quiz results, one must look at the pre-adaptation quiz grades online in Appendix B.]

Our second accommodation was the choice board for the unit project. This idea was derived from the Pennsylvania State Modern Language Association (PSMLA) Guide to Standards and Assessment. [Note: The Guide can be ordered from the PSMLA Web site at <http://psmla.mercyhurst.edu/PSMLA%20Publications.htm>.]

The choice board empowers the students to choose projects that will best display their talents. They had 12 options on the choice board, one of which was a free choice approved by the teacher. Some of the activities included creating surveys, soccer dream teams, skits, etc. [The choice board (Appendix D), the most popular projects chosen (Appendix E) and student grades (Appendix F) can all be found on the ACTFL Web site.]

Our final and perhaps most major accommodation was that spelling mistakes did not affect students' grades. Spelling did not count on the three projects and the oral quiz eliminated spelling problems

typically occurring on a written vocabulary quiz. If we were able to understand what they had written despite a minor spelling error, it did not affect the students' grade.

At the end of the unit, a post-unit student survey was distributed. Students they were to fill in the blank in two statements: *My favorite thing about the soccer unit was \_\_\_\_\_ and The most helpful change, or adaptation that my teacher made this unit was \_\_\_\_\_.* [Survey results can be found online in Appendix G.]

## Reflecting

### Kristin

According to the information I collected from my class, the overall average of the quiz grades with no adaptations was significantly lower than the TPR quiz with adaptations. I knew going into this lesson that some of my students had interest in learning American Sign Language (ASL). When I told them that they would be learning Spanish along with ASL, they were more apt to get involved in learning. Also, I found during study hall periods, my sixth graders were working together on how to remember the sign that corresponded with the spoken Spanish vocabulary. My students with special needs who typically struggle with reading or writing did not have this issue as a result of differentiated assessment. Also, it should be noted that my students completed the



projects and studied on their own. There was no external help from families or other staff. I did not provide a study guide for this type of test because it would have been extremely difficult to send home pictures of the signs we performed that corresponded with the Spanish. Therefore students' memory and connection from speech to movement was vital in this form of assessment.

To note the results of the grades of the choice board projects, I found similar results from previous assessments in my classroom. The students working collaboratively in groups scored higher than the individual assessments I have given. Students enjoyed having the freedom of designing their own project, thus the free space was very popular. My students also told me that the storyboards were fun and allowed them to use their creative artistic skills to add to the written Spanish commentary. Another positive comment made was that many of the students enjoyed learning about sports in the dream team context.

One comment that was written on a few of the post-unit surveys was that students were pleased to have class time to work on their choice boards. They later told me that it caused less stress for them at home by not having to work on Spanish with their parents who were unable to assist them. In addition, they could work in groups more easily in class rather than having to meet or talk outside of class.

### **Johanna**

Based on the student poll, I began teaching the soccer unit using the three accommodations previously mentioned. I initially feared that my ninth grade students might be a bit too self-conscious or "cool" for the TPR gestures. After the initial awkward moment, in which everyone checked to see that the others were participating, it went well. An outgoing, class leader said "oh cool" and he created the first gesture. My students definitely enjoyed creating the gestures for the new words. They liked being more active in the classroom as well. The constant activity maintained the students' interest. In addition, they liked the choice board because it gave them a voice and enabled their individual talents to shine. In previous chapters, I had assigned a class project which everyone had to complete. Projects create a real sense of competition in my classroom. With the choice board, those who were more vocal chose interviews or skits, whereas more artistic students chose projects such as the dream team or sports collage. Due to its success, I will definitely incorporate the choice board in future class projects.

Lastly, the spelling accommodation came as a great relief to the students. The thought of spelling perfectly in a foreign language can be daunting to first year students, especially when they do not spell perfectly in their native language. This adaptation eased the level of anxiety. It should be noted, however, that even though there was no point deduction for misspelling, the spelling was not any better or worse than it normally is.

## **Looking at the Data**

A closer look at the data collected revealed some rather interesting insights. In the quizzes given before adaptations had been made, there was a significant difference in grades between the students with and without IEPs. The students without IEPs clearly outperformed the students with IEPs. This changed, however, as seen in the TPR quiz grades. Students with IEPs performed at the same level as students without IEPs on this particular assessment. It also should be noted that there was no change in the grades of students who typically perform well on assessments. We had given the students with IEPs the tools by which to succeed and leveled the playing field. As a result, the student with IEPs scored the same grades. Also interesting was that students thought that they learned best through projects, then games, and then visuals.

The students with IEPs also performed as well as the regular students in this task. A major reason for this was that spelling mistakes did not count against them. Additionally, the students chose their own three projects to create that enabled them to choose three projects that would display their strengths, whether they were artistically talented or more verbally oriented. The most popular project choice, which 16 of the 19 total students chose, was creating a dream team featuring soccer players from the target language culture. In a close second place, 15 students chose to create sport surveys with questions in the target language. The overall favorite thing about the soccer unit, according to a post-unit student survey, was the project choice board and the best overall adaptation, according to our students, was the TPR quiz. The surveys and grade comparisons served as great tools in evaluating our soccer unit successes and failures.

## **Rethinking**

### **Kristin**

If I were to teach this unit again, and I plan to, there is one thing I would change. I found that some of the choice board options were a bit difficult for novice learners in the middle school. Some students struggled with choosing and working because the goals were too difficult for true beginners. This is where the free space and other adaptations had to be made. High-level students, however, did perform very well and were challenged by most of the choices.

Completing this teaching project motivates me to continue differentiating instruction and assessment in my Spanish classroom. I am pleased with the results and commentary on the choice board and TPR quiz. This project, however, does raise many issues. What are true adaptations and which are most appropriate and helpful for all foreign language students? As world language teachers, we are very familiar with constantly making accommodations for our students because we teach a content that is foreign to most students. We must be realistic: spelling is not the most crucial part of learning a second language in my opinion yet we place so much emphasis on it. If there is no barrier in communication due to a spelling error, then



why should we be concerned? At which level does spelling gain more importance? I understand that we want to produce well-versed and educated students, but somehow I think that we should focus first on achieving communicative competence.

In addition to the three accommodations we investigated, I have used learning centers at least five times this year and they too have been successful with all learners. I am defining learning centers as several stations throughout the classroom in which students are to complete a specific foreign language content-based task. Students in these situations scaffold one another, creating a student-oriented classroom.

As a final note and after reflecting and conferencing about the lessons included in the research project with my mentor teacher, I realized how much my students really enjoyed the lessons including TPR. All—yes all—students were engaged during the input of ASL simultaneous with Spanish. I noticed how kinesthetic the majority of my students were and the signing allowed my students to become more aware of their bodies. Also, I have been told how developmentally appropriate the movements are for the students. As foreign language educators, we are striving to move away from relating Spanish to English. We use visuals for students to associate meaning rather than the translation method. Incorporating gestures, or even official sign language, allows students to listen and tune their ears and remember verbal sounds for their true meaning.

### **Johanna**

Upon completing the soccer unit, I felt a real sense of accomplishment. Students with IEPs were performing at the same level of high achievement as the students without IEPs. Equally important, students without IEPs maintained the same impressive grades as from previous units.

Unique to this project was the idea of adaptations being made for all students. These adaptations enabled the students with IEPs to be graded fairly and perform as well as the students without IEPs.

At the same time, the students without IEPs did not show signs of boredom or comment that things were suddenly too easy. The adaptations for spelling, TPR vocabulary quiz, and the unit project allowed all students to be successful and display their talents for all to see. One of my students with an IEP even stepped up as a class leader in a review of the TPR gestures prior to the quiz. My initial preconception was that accommodations meant making things easier for the students with IEPs. After this project, however, I realize that accommodations are adaptations in instruction and assessment that allow all students to be successful in the classroom. It does not involve simplifying material or lowering expectations. As a foreign language educator, I believe that all students have the ability to learn another language if given the proper tools. Proper accommodations are one of these necessary tools in order to help all students be successful in the classroom.

In addition to using the successful three accommodations used in this project, we plan on also using other accommodations such as a monthly calendar with assignments for the students, study guides, learning centers, and counting spelling mistakes only when the objective of the assignment states that spelling will be counted.

### **Acknowledgment**

A special thank you to Dr. Richard Donato at the University of Pittsburgh for his instruction and supervision on this project.

Please see the section of the ACTFL Web site, *See it in the Language Educator?* for more information about this project, including all appendixes mentioned here.

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