Moving Along the Proficiency Continuum

It has been a North Star for language educators for years, yet it seems like an impossible task. Developing a curriculum plan that results in student proficiency that grows and increases from semester to semester, from year to year, has long been the goal on our horizon—but it seems to keep sitting out there, just beyond our reach. As teachers, we look for the one strategy, the one activity, the one resource, or the one tool that will most effectively help our learners acquire a new language. Principals and administrators may look for the one special teacher who will transform his or her department into one in which the students confidently use the language, regardless of how long they have been taking language classes. Parents often look for the one school, the one program, or the one language that will engage and motivate their children and magically cause language learning to happen. Ultimately the responsibility falls back to us, the language educators. How can we make sure that students in language classes are given opportunities to grow and demonstrate their knowledge and use of language—no matter which language they choose to study, no matter which school they attend in a district, and no matter which teacher they have?

This is the challenge that the world language teachers in Plano Independent School District (TX) took up. How could we implement a performance-based curriculum plan encompassing Levels 1, 2, and 3 in a district serving approximately 10,000 students in world language classes, Grades 7–12? In order to answer that question, teachers in the district worked together in curriculum-writing teams and designed a complete revamp of curriculum for Levels 1, 2, and 3, developing a performance-to-proficiency-based curriculum that aligns with the National Standards.
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**Priority A: Adopt the Backward Design Mindset**

Plano ISD is an early adopter of the curriculum model outlined in *Understanding by Design* by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2005). In this district, it is a given that any curriculum redesign follows the backward design structure. By embracing the “begin with the end in mind” mindset and applying that phrase to all facets of curriculum development—not just learner outcomes for a unit, semester, or level—the curriculum teams put many thorny issues in perspective. Several specific components benefited from application of the question: “What is the end we need to have in mind?”

- What are the guiding principles that the curriculum illustrates and what instructional philosophy is needed to implement them well?
- What professional learning will be needed to develop initial background knowledge and understanding as well as ongoing expertise within the instructor cadres?
- What summative performance assessments will provide evidence that learners have made appropriate progress as they move through the semester?
- What will the rubrics need to include in order to provide learners with feedback to improve their next performances?

The question that had the greatest impact on unit development was this one: What target structures have the most value in terms of transfer, therefore warranting extended time and attention from both teachers and learners? We fully accepted the characteristics of transfer and transfer goals as defined by Wiggins and McTighe in a blog post in 2012 (see https://grantwiggins.wordpress.com/2012/10/03/a-clarification-of-the-goal-of-transfer-and-how-it-relates-to-testing/).

They require application (not simply recognition or recall); this application occurs in new situations (not ones previously taught or encountered—i.e., the task cannot be accomplished as a result of rote “plugging in”); some strategic thinking is required (not simply following a recipe that is insensitive to context); the learners must apply their learning autonomously (on their own, without teacher prompting or support); and transfer calls for the use of habits of mind (i.e., good judgment, self-regulation, and persistence) along with academic understanding, knowledge, and skill.

Seeing grammar, structure, and vocabulary through this lens allowed the writing teams to recognize and abandon legacy practices that were in reality dead ends in respect to communication goals and proficiency attainment.

**Priority B: Believe and Attend to Research**

The first instance of adherence to this priority had already been realized when the writing teams recognized the importance of transfer and transfer goals within the backward design process. The professional learning part of the process involved reading and studying pivotal texts that serve as a foundation for world language instruction, mining the research in second language acquisition that undergirded these pivotal texts, and picking out the golden nuggets to be applied at the classroom level. In our case, the teams looked for specific findings that can be implemented at scale (across all classrooms); that form the basis for focused professional learning opportunities, regardless of any pre-existing experience or lack thereof on the part of district teachers; that result in strategies that are visible in classroom practice; and that yield functional results as evidenced by learner products and artifacts.

Linda Fleming, French teacher at Rice Middle School, has been a member of curriculum writing teams from the beginning of the process. In her perspective, “The professional learning provided by the district adds value to moving students from Novice to Intermediate by continually providing learning opportunities in a variety of topics. When a teacher is up-to-date with new ways of instruction, the students benefit by growing. Research is constantly changing the way we look at education and foreign language education. By having our teachers knowledgeable on the most recent research, they can use the information in the classroom to reach students in new, interesting and stimulating ways. This promotes better growth in the students than if the teacher used 10-year-old foreign language education research.”

Over time, these nuggets were consolidated and institutionalized into five preferred instructional practices that are the basis of daily classroom instructional decisions and choices: (1) teaching in the target language; (2) inductive grammar instruction; (3) student influenced vocabulary acquisition; (4) reading to learn; and (5) writing to learn.

**Priority C: Choose Effectiveness Over Efficiency**

The demands on teachers today involve many things that take away from planning time and learning time. Due to pressures from many different directions, it is very easy for classroom teachers to default to efficiency mode when it comes to planning for and delivering instruction, getting from point A to B quickly, making learning formulaic, clean, and as cut and dried as possible. But deep learning is messy; it takes time for learners to make sense of learning—and persistence and working through misunderstandings is part
of what learners need to experience in order to own their learning. Linda (Nino) Martin, a Spanish teacher at Clark High School, has observed, “The fact that we focus much more on communicating a message rather than nitpicking little grammar details allows our students to dare to speak more. Instead of teaching random vocabulary, students learn vocabulary that will have useful real-life applications that are relevant to the students’ lives. The topics move from more concrete to more abstract themes as students move up to higher levels.”

The “teach less for more” concept results in a list of “mores” that may take additional class time, but will have positive results when it comes to performance, proficiency, and student engagement:

- More opportunities for communication instead of more content;
- More tasks that require using the language to interact, explain, or describe than exercises that focus on learning about language mechanics;
- More student-to-student talk in the language than teacher-to-student talk in the language;
- More emphasis on responding in personally meaningful ways than on responding 100% accurately;
- More self- and peer-based error correction than teacher-based error correction; and
- More descriptive feedback than grades.

“Teach less for more” has in many instances resulted in cognitive dissonance among curriculum writing team members, just the stimulus necessary to initiate great conversations and professional growth. It takes courage and resiliency to put the needs of learners before legacy practices and tradition. However, once teachers are able to see their students’ progress and how they are able to meet the stated proficiency goals for each level, they have been able to move beyond the prior construct. Specific types of teacher strategies are called for under the “teach less for more” philosophy, as noted by Becky Elizondo, AP Spanish teacher at Plano West Senior High School: “We support and scaffold learning by asking open-ended questions, encouraging elaboration in the target language, pushing higher-level thinking for application, using authentic materials to support and enhance the curriculum, and striving to make acquisition meaningful for our learners.”

Priority D: Define Vertical Alignment and Articulation in Proficiency Terms

This step is not only a critical piece of the process, but is also one which has the potential to be a great professional learning process that can unite and connect all members of the instructional team. Traditionally, “prepared for the next level” has meant a list of vocabulary sets by topic and a companion list of verbs and grammatical structures that go along with that. Determining if a student has progressed enough to move to the next level in the instructional sequence often ends up being a list of items that teachers check off as taught, and teachers at the next level in the sequence then see as a list of what has been learned, and that list in turn serves as a foundation for a new list with new vocabulary sets, new verbs, and new structures. This organizing structure can be based on a textbook series, an individual teacher’s legacy lesson plans, or an external achievement assessment of some kind. Even more problematic is basing the curriculum for an entire department or district on the personal learning plan of one or two excellent teachers, potentially creating an “us” versus “them” mindset within the instructional team.

The key is to redefine the articulation and alignment from one level to the next based on the performance progression found in the Proficiency Guidelines. This type of alignment is not teacher dependent or textbook dependent, but teacher independent and textbook independent—making it much more likely that the curriculum-learning plan will be consistent and equitable from classroom to classroom, campus to campus. Within this kind of alignment, content-based “I can” statements or learning targets can be married to performance descriptors and language functions. This combination provides clear direction toward mini-performances which in turn provide opportunities for descriptive feedback, based on the Performance Descriptors, regarding learner progress toward a task-based summative performance. This performance is designed to provide evidence of attainment or degree of...
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The attainment of the next step in the proficiency staircase. The alignment shifts from a “knowing” alignment to a “doing” alignment, from a grammar alignment to a language function + content alignment.

Priority E
Emphasize the Learner Over the Instructor

“I think the most important aspect of our curriculum is that as students begin their language journey, they are in a safe environment to communicate their ideas without a focus on errors, which results in students who are not afraid to express themselves and have no fear of mistakes or embarrassment. As their language learning continues, they see more need for accuracy; however, it is gradual and does not instill fear of performing,” states Patricia Irias, a Spanish teacher at Williams High School.

Irias has observed the ultimate reward in a student-centered classroom: The learner invests as much time and effort into the learning as the teacher does. If a curriculum is built to provide performance opportunities and to provide space for learner input into content and process, there is also a likelihood of increased student cognitive engagement, investment, and motivation. To this end, the curriculum-writing teams incorporated intentional consistency into the learning plans. The rubrics used to provide descriptive feedback and evaluate student performances cross levels with a sliding grading scale: Level 1 and 2 have the same rubrics for speaking and writing performances, and Levels 3 and 4 have the same rubrics. Because the rubrics cross levels, there are elements of Intermediate in the highest performance range of the Level 1 and 2 rubrics, and elements of Advanced in the highest performance range of the Level 3 and 4 rubrics.

Learners have “the end in mind” and are always looking at performance characteristics necessary to move them up the proficiency scale. The rubrics cross classroom tasks, formative tasks, and summative tasks, causing the students to be very familiar with the expectations required to earn the grade that they want. Any randomness within the curriculum plan is initiated from the learners rather than from the teachers. Teachers have a clear picture of the performance goals; this framework allows for either greater or lesser scaffolding on the teacher’s part, and input, inquiry, and personal meaning making on the learners’ parts. This effect extends to the grade book, with more emphasis being placed on processes which lead to performance (using and doing) instead of on foundational knowledge and facts (knowing and memorizing). According to Alina Isbell, Spanish teacher at Murphy Middle School, “We have small tasks within the input part of the learning cycle in which we ask students to produce output in small amounts, such as exit passes or short responses. Our kids get a variety of opportunities to use the language. (They) are assigned specific tasks dealing with each mode of communication as well as tasks that combine them in a performance-based quiz or project.”

Kyle Hercules, Spanish teacher at Clark High School, sums up the benefits of a performance-based curriculum in this way: “First, all input is done on a communicative level. Students see and hear full language. They learn to comprehend without needing to know every single word that is being communicated. The three modes are intertwined. They are exposed to language through speaking, writing, listening, and reading. With the scaffolding we provide, students are able to develop output at the very beginning of Level 1. Because no multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank assessments are given, students know they have to be able to produce. They have to be able to show that they can respond appropriately to something or that they can recombine or create a response themselves. As the year continues, students are able to not just recite and give back what we have been working on and practicing in class. They are able to take and apply what they have learned to scenarios that are outside their own classroom experience. In fact, it pushes them into the Intermediate levels early on.”

If we want a learning plan that results in real growth in proficiency through performance, we should take a chance and trust the research. Buy into the backward design mindset. Implement the true vertical alignment to articulate learning from level to level. Remember that it is all about the students, not necessarily the teachers. Teach less to provide room for students to learn more. Our goal is within reach.

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