Evidence of Student Learning: 
A Starting Point for Collecting and Analyzing 
Data Related to Communication  
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Data is the hot topic of teacher training and evaluation; teachers of every subject area are collecting, documenting, and analyzing data to measure the effect on student performance. It has become high stakes throughout K–16 to demonstrate student learning in classes and programs. In this frenzy of documentation, everything is considered, everything is saved, and everything is analyzed. For language learning, answers are usually fuzzy when considering what to document and how to consider student growth. Administrators without a language education background cannot typically provide much advice and support for what is generally an untested discipline in the state.

The easiest data to collect and analyze are those which are objective and clear-cut. When it comes down to it, however, this formative information—whether or not our students can fill in a sentence, can select the word that correctly conjugates a verb or can list the right possessive adjective—should not be the ultimate focus of assessment nor the source of evidence collected. Much more important is what students can do with these pre-communicative elements to respond to a communicative task or to interact about a topic. The functional components of language development do not mean anything if the students cannot string the pieces together to create meaningful communication.

Consider the following fill-in-the-blank test question in which a student must select the most appropriate word to complete the sentence:

Elena _______ alta.

a. está  
b. es  
c. tiene  
d. hace

The sentence in Spanish reads “Elena ___ tall” and option b. “es” is the preferred answer to complete the sentence “Elena is tall.” The other options to complete the sentence are various ways that, in other contexts in Spanish, mean “he, she, or it is.” For a sympathetic listener, the basic sentence might be understood if completed with any of the options, even if answers a, c, and d are grammatically incorrect. Even more important to consider, however, is that the fill-in offers no way for the student to express a message that is meaningful or communicative, or to elaborate on Elena’s other physi-
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cal characteristics and personality, if, in fact, Elena even exists to the teacher and the students.

If the profession continues to rely on fill-ins and other pre-communicative activities to assess our students’ abilities, we will continue to put the focus on form rather than on the message itself. If the profession continues to rely on assessment through completion of disconnected, abstract, and decontextualized sentences to practice or assess discrete grammar or vocabulary, students will not understand that the ultimate purpose of language learning is communication.

What data are really important for our ultimate goal of proficiency development and what should be done with the data to obtain a clear understanding of what students know and how they are able to use what they have learned to communicate effectively? These are tough questions because effective communication does not happen in consistent and easy-to-measure ways. Furthermore, on the surface, effective communication in the various student responses to a prompt might look very different from one response to the next. Finally, because these issues are not widely discussed in professional development not specific to one discipline, the question of what to collect related to communication and how often is unclear to teachers and administrators alike.

Of course, the discussion of data and assessment in language education begins with communication. If communication is to be the basis of our data in the language classroom, the focus of instruction needs to be communicative and this starts with a learning environment infused with the target language. The comprehensible input that we provide in the target language to our students in the form of explanations, directions, and authentic resources will support their ability to produce more.

Since its publication in 2010, there has been great interest and discussion in the language community about the ACTFL position statement that describes the 90%+ goal of interaction in the target language in the classroom (www.actfl.org/news/position-statements/use-the-target-language-the-classroom). Once a language educator has embraced this expectation, steps are considered to meet the goal. The first step is speaking as much in the target language as possible, as the teacher. The second step is to get students to respond to you only in the target language. You don’t respond or react unless the student asks or answers in Spanish (or Chinese, German, etc.). The focus of instruction must be content-based and tied to learning outcomes so that class discussions are in the language and not about the language. The most difficult third step is to foster engaging extensions of class discussion in the form of interaction between the students as the teacher circulates around the room. The teacher cannot hear or monitor each individual group discussion at the same time so the expectation must be set. To help prepare students for this final expectation, a variety of procedures can be established so that the class routine is that students interact with one another. Students can be expected to ask follow-up questions of their classmates in presentations, to report or comment on their partner’s responses, to provide summaries of the conclusions their group work produces, and other such activities.

Once a communicative classroom environment is established, to determine the focus of data collection, it helps to go back to basics with the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. (You can download the complete text of the Guidelines along with explanations and language samples for the various levels at www.actproficiencyguidelines2012.org.) The four criteria that are used to describe the various levels of proficiency include the functions or tasks that can be completed within the various contexts or content in a certain text type or level of production and with a level of precision or accuracy.

An interesting place to start with data collection to demonstrate student learning and growth is with text type, probably the most overlooked of the four criteria to determine the level of proficiency. The text type is the form of language that a student includes in a written or spoken utterance. The Novice level learner relies on memorized information and the text type of the Novice level of proficiency is memorized words and phrases, whereas the Intermediate level is characterized by the ability to create with the language at the level of the sentence.

Students will produce for you at the word level or at the sentence level depending on the type of questions you ask in class and the format and expectation of interactive group or pair work. From Day One of language learning, we should be teaching our students how to expand on what they communicate, pushing them to do so, and rewarding them for their efforts at elaborated responses. If they are not encouraged and supported from the very beginning of language learning to include more information and provide strong, solid responses, they will have a hard time moving up the proficiency scale to the Intermediate level.

The active teaching of elaboration techniques is important, and encouraging more detailed responses to questions is essential in the beginning level language class. Students can be told, for example, that when responding they should consider the “who, what, when, where and how” to provide additional details and more specific information. Novices should be told to include one of a list of connecting or linking words that you provide for them in their answer (and, or, with, because, for, then, next, etc.). In the early stage of language learning, they must be made to understand that the strength of their answer depends in great part on how much they say. This can lead to discussions about how to vary the sentence type so that their response is more in-depth and complete and better helps the listener know what they are trying to express.

Modeled support during practice in class can lead to fuller answers in assessments. In describing their best friends, for example, students...
can be offered the following sentence starters to model their solid and complete response:

- My best friend is . . .
- My best friend has . . .
- My best friend needs . . .
- I like my best friend because . . .
- I am with my best friend when . . .

As students are encouraged in class to elaborate and produce more language, the number of words written or the amount of time spent talking can be documented at the start of a unit or at the start of the year as compared to at the end, depending on the period of focus for this data. A weekly dialogue journal entry—to answer a basic question related to the context of the unit being studied—trains students to write in an open-ended way without worrying about correctness. The focus is the message. This works best when dictionaries are not allowed and students are encouraged to write about what they know how to say or to circumlocute around what they don’t. Students are timed and told to write the whole time period. The key is to find topics of interest and relevance about which the students can creatively answer depending on their particular interests. For example, in the week that students are studying family vocabulary, they can be asked about their favorite family member, which celebrity family they like, or to describe a family that they make up for themselves of television characters. Remember to make the questions open-ended to offer the most possibilities for elaboration and extension. As the number of journal entries grow, students can be involved in the process of tabulating the word count and their progress can be monitored and studied for your data collection. Once progress has been made in tracking the quantity of information given, the focus can turn to the quality of information in the message: the number of connected thoughts, the number of extensions or elaborations included, etc.

As another option, and, again, the timing depends on your needs—at the start and end of the unit, for example—students can record a spontaneous response to a task, prompt, or question by using your school’s language lab, Google Voice, Audacity, or some other voice recording application. With Google Voice, you create a phone number attached to your Gmail account and students call the number in class using their cell phones. The messages they leave will be recorded on easy-to-access files in your Gmail account, and the time that they spend talking is indicated for you (to the second) in the message. Amazingly, the recordings are clear and easy to understand even though all students are speaking at the same time. It is best to give the task to the students and ask them to call immediately during class, offering no time to think through their answers. This trains students to speak spontaneously and to respond to the assignment quickly, an important skill in interpersonal communication. For example: You are studying house vocabulary and, at the end of the unit, you ask students to take out their phones, call the number and describe their ideal house, talk about what they like to do in their favorite room in their house, or describe what is special about a specific room in their house. Push them to give 5 strong sentences in their response, or to speak for 1 minute as an initial expectation. As students progress over the year, the time expectation can increase. (Just remember to have them include their names in the message as all you have in your email box are a list of phone numbers to identify the students.)

The spoken or written prompt can be given at the start of the unit and at the end to measure growth and learning over the course of the instruction of the unit. This is the idea of a pre- and post-test. What did the students know at the start of the unit and what more were they able to do as a result of the learning that took place over the unit? As another option, the prompts can regularly be given at the end of each unit as a culminating assessment to show growth over time as the year progresses throughout the various units of study.

Thinking back to the criteria to describe the proficiency levels, as a profession, we have historically placed far too much emphasis on precision. We have valued correctness over communication which has led to a focus on form rather than on communication.
in teaching. We can change that by encouraging our students to have less fear in creating with the language by telling them that errors are a natural part of language learning. If they are not making mistakes, they are not trying hard enough. Taking risks is an important part of language learning and we can help to turn the focus on risk taking with our instructional focus on text type. The data that we collect and analyze to determine evidence of student growth must be connected to what our students can do with the language. We need to focus less emphasis on how correctly they complete communicative tasks and place more on how fully and creatively they complete the tasks we design for them.

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