

Chapter 83

Usage-Based Instruction: Enhancing Interpersonal Communication in Foreign Languages

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ABSTRACT

The following case study describes the effort of a small foreign language program at a medium-size private Mid-Western university in which instructors representing several world languages collaborated to undertake a complete modification of traditional textbook-driven curriculum to develop an innovative approach to teaching interpersonal communication in foreign languages. This approach was inspired by the insights coming from the Cognitive Perspective in Second Language Acquisition Cognitive Perspective in SLA, a relatively young, interdisciplinary field, which in its conclusions relies on research in such disciplines as Cognitive Linguistics, Cognitive Psychology, Construction Grammar, Usage-Based Grammar, Artificial Intelligence, and so forth, served as a theoretical foundation for the pilot study that is currently underway. The case will demonstrate how application of Cognitive Perspective increases the efficiency of instruction for oral proficiency. Although the role of technology in this approach is not decisive, it represents a significant element of the instructional sequence to be described in this chapter.

BACKGROUND

The efficiency of foreign language instruction for oral proficiency is generally low across the US. In 2010, the Center for Applied Second Language Studies conducted a nation-wide study to determine what proficiency level is achieved by high school students after four years of foreign language instruction. The study used Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency Test – a web-based assessment used to determine proficiency

in reading, writing, speaking, and listening (<http://www.avantassessment.com/stamp>). The study found that out of 6,265, who participated in the speaking component of the test and who had been studying Spanish and French for 4 years (630-720 hours of instruction), only 6% reached Mid or High Intermediate levels of proficiency in speaking with the remaining majority not even crossing the threshold between the Novice and Intermediate levels in speaking. These results are even more disappointing considering the fact that

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the fourth year of foreign language instruction is generally perceived by parents, administrators, and students themselves as an advanced level of language learning.

Equally troubling is the situation at the post-secondary educational level. According to Long, Gor, and Jackson, a typical U.S. American language and literature major is lucky to achieve level 2 of Interagency Language Roundtable after four years of study with the median attainment after four years of harder languages being only at level 1, (Long et al., 2012, p. 100). In the meantime, the news about shutting down of foreign language programs or substituting them with “more important” academic disciplines abounds in the media. Hidden behind these drastic measures is the public’s disbelief in the professions’ ability to bring students to tangible levels of oral proficiency within the time frame allocated for it. Maximizing efficiency of teaching oral proficiency is, therefore, a problem the profession needs to confront and especially in these difficult economic times.

SETTING THE STAGE: INSTRUCTIONAL CONTEXT

Lewis University is a private university located some 40 miles southwest of Chicago, which offers 80 undergraduate majors and 25 graduate programs through its 4 colleges. It is one of more than 60 universities worldwide sponsored by the De La Salle Christian Brothers, a more than 300 year-old religious order devoted exclusively to teaching. With its yearly growing enrollments, Lewis University is recognized by U.S. News and World Report and Princeton Review as one of the finest, mid-sized, comprehensive Catholic universities in the country which focuses on professional and career preparation in a liberal arts tradition. Its total student body is 6,500 undergraduate and graduate students, many of whom represent the first college educated generation in their families.

From 1978 to 2004, the University was not offering foreign language instruction to its students. In 2004, thanks to the 1.7 million Title III Grant from the U.S. Department of Education Program, it became possible for the University to re-institute foreign language instruction through the newly established Foreign Language Program. The new Program director, and the author of this case study, was hired with a mandate to establish the type of instruction that would meet immediate practical needs of students in studying foreign language. Today, the Program offers instruction in nine foreign languages, including not only such commonly taught languages as Spanish, French, and German, but also such critical languages as Russian, Polish, Chinese, Japanese, Italian, and Arabic.

Unlike most universities with their two-tier foreign language departments in which lower level language courses feed into higher level, mostly literature, courses intended for language and literature majors, Lewis University Foreign Language Program does not offer academic degrees in foreign languages or literature. Consequently, language is taken by the students representing a wide variety of academic majors with the purpose of personal enrichment, sometimes out of mere curiosity and often with the expectation that knowledge of foreign languages might help them in achieving their career goals in such areas as business, nursing, education, counseling and so on. It is also important to emphasize that foreign language is not a required subject in the University general education curriculum and can be taken by the students only as an elective course. The latter creates a peculiar combination of factors that affects students’ motivation and their commitment to sustained language study. On the one hand, most students enrolled in foreign language courses are motivated to study the language of their choice. On the other hand, however, the time constraints imposed by their other academic commitments prevent them from

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