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Assessment of Our National Standards' Communication Modes

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Why change our assessment?

Nothing makes a more powerful statement to our students as to what we really value in language learning than our assessment. How we "test" tells them what is important enough to be evaluated. Assessment that only measures grammar on demand, or vocabulary out of context, or isolated skills, sends the message to students that you learn a language by mastering these components of language. The foreign language profession has been moving from such traditional assessment toward more authentic assessment through the emphasis on communicative competence, proficiency-oriented instruction, even TPR-Storytelling. We are asked to make language learning meaningful and purposeful. Our assessment practices need to fit such a goal.

What are the three communication modes?

Our professional consensus around standards for students of languages, Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing Students for the 21st Century, sets forth purposes for learning languages. The emphasis is on real life usage of the language, both in learning and in applying what one knows about languages and cultures. Under the "C" of Communication, rather than four separate and isolated skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), the focus is on three modes of communication that emphasize what the user is trying to do: use the language for interpersonal, interpretive, or presentational purposes. The content standards explain these purposes, making clear the interaction of the four skills.

Interpersonal communication is not memorized dialogues. The interpersonal mode involves an exchange of information, ideas, or opinions. A negotiation of meaning takes place, an engagement in the conversation because of a real need or purpose. Rather than just asking a question and then thinking of one's next question, the asker must think about the response and follow-up with a comment or another question cued by that response.

Interpretive communication is not translation. The emphasis is first on understanding the gist of something heard, read, or viewed, and then on trying to dig to deeper levels of understanding. As the interpreter becomes more sophisticated, he or she uses more linguistic clues to increase understanding. Over time, knowledge of cultural implications and the social, geographical, historical, and even political background help one interpret the message more completely.

Presentational communication is not stating a message without regard to one's audience. The presenter needs to be acutely aware of how to adapt the style, tone, and even language of a presentation to match the audience. The presentation may be spoken, written, or visual. The presenter must consider the characteristics of the audience, including the level of formality, culture, social relationships, and the expected style for a particular mode (e.g., should I start a formal speech with a joke? In some cultures that is expected; in others it is taboo).

How good is good enough?

Assessment of these three modes of communication needs to focus on two things:
1) how students will show their achievement of the content standards, through what kind of performance, and 2) how well the student is showing progress toward improved performance. It is not enough to devise excellent performance tasks to capture the goals for the instruction. Students also need to be evaluated as to their progress, with criteria as specific as possible that describe the key milestones along that pathway of progress. The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and the new ACTFL K-12 Performance Guidelines are very helpful both in selecting the criteria on which a student will be evaluated on a particular task and in describing the level of quality expected. Then student performances can be evaluated as to whether they exceed expectations, meet expectations, or are not there yet.

How can students improve their performance?

To improve their performance, a cycle of modeling + practice + feedback is essential. First, a student must have a sense of the expected performance: modeling. The student also needs opportunities to perform and demonstrate what is expected: practice. The key to improvement, however, is the descriptive evaluation received after the practice: feedback. These are key elements in a new model for assessment. Rather than keeping the end goal a secret, the expectations of the "test" are made clear to the students. Students can achieve what is expected then by practicing the expected performance and receiving feedback that points out what they can do, what they are not yet doing, and how specifically to improve their performance. The student comes closer and closer to approximating the performance standards, getting better at using the three modes of communication. This is not a linear sequence, but involves looking for assessable moments in the classroom when students practice various components of the target performance task and receive feedback. The feedback from this varied and purposeful practice will help each student move closer to achieving the expected goal.

What does this look like? Performance Assessment Units

To model this type of assessment, a project directed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has begun the development of performance assessment units. In each unit, a context is set that could be used with students at any age and at any level of language ability. For example, students at both the novice, intermediate, and pre-advanced language levels could practice meaningful and purposeful language tasks under the theme "Your Health." In this approach, the teacher closely links the assessment with the instruction, since rather than occurring in isolation, the performance tasks must flow from the learning activities in the classroom.

In the performance assessment units designed in this project, students first do an interpretive task. They listen to or read an authentic text (e.g., newspaper article, radio broadcast) and answer information as well as interpretive questions to assess comprehension. The teacher provides feedback on the students' performance.

Next comes an interpersonal task. After receiving feedback regarding the interpretive phase, students engage in interpersonal oral communication about the given topic, building on the interpretive text. Students use this as an opportunity to find out more information from each other, preparing them for the next phase.

Finally, students engage in presentational communication, by sharing their research, ideas, or opinions. Sample presentational formats include speeches, drama skits, radio broadcasts, posters, brochures, essays, and websites. The challenge is for students to show what they can do with the language through this presentational task.

Can we trust new types of evidence?

Students, parents, and teachers express their frustration over the limited forms of assessment currently in use. Relying on paper and pencil measures, multiple choice questions, or grammar manipulation tests proves insufficient to gauge how well a student can use a second language. Using the performance assessment units described here brings into a closer match the curriculum goals and the instructional practices. A broader range of evidence provides a better picture of what the student can do with the language, a picture that is at the same time more motivating to the student, since it also matches his or her purposes for learning the language. The benefit is that the full range of students' learning characteristics can be showcased, instead of relying on only one or two means of expressing what they know. Rather than asking students to translate a paragraph or fill in blanks with specific vocabulary, they are asked to describe their family. Different students will describe their family by using different words and structures, some written, some oral, some via video, but the teacher will be able to gauge each student's progress toward the goal. The challenge is that teachers need to offer and trust a variety of ways for students to show what they can do. Then both teachers and students will see strong evidence of achieving the standards, evidence that matches their purposes for learning another language.