

Meaningful and Purposeful Practice

by Donna Clementi

When asked how to build proficiency in a world language, the response might be similar to the old joke: Question: How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Response: Practice, practice, practice.

The need for practice cannot be denied. However, we know that practice alone does not result in increased language proficiency. For practice to be helpful, the tasks or activities have to be meaningful to the learner, and they have to be purposeful. The graphic (opposite page), designed by Clementi and Terrill, the authors of American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL's) *Keys to Planning for Learning* (2013), visually represents the components that contribute to meaningful and purposeful practice in learning a world language, practice that leads to greater proficiency.

The entire graphic is centered around the letter *i* representing three key elements that motivate learners to practice using the language in order to build proficiency. We know that motivation varies from learner to learner depending on many factors including age, interests, past experiences. We also know that if we can awaken the curiosity of learners by introducing a thematic unit with interesting props, stories, images, artifacts, questions, they are more likely to become engaged in exploring the theme over the extended time needed to internalize the new vocabulary and linguistic patterns.

Motivation to learn a language is often based on a desire to talk with people who live in different places around the world and speak different languages. When learners approach these interactions with interest, open minds, and curiosity, they are developing skills in interculturality, defined as the interaction of people from different cultural backgrounds using authentic language appropriately in a way that demonstrates knowledge and understanding of the cultures (LinguaFolio, 2010). Through multiple encounters over time with people from around the world, language learners grow in their ability to reflect on their personal feelings, thoughts, perceptions, and reactions to these encounters, and they also grow in their ability to reflect on their own life and culture. Thanks to programs like ePals, Skype in the Classroom, and iEarn, connecting with people around the world is possible and addresses the Communities Standard that requires learners to use the target language both within and beyond the classroom to interact and collaborate in their community and the globalized world. These connections

make the language come alive, sparking curiosity and a need/want to know more among learners.

Since the introduction of this graphic, the *i* in the center of the graphic has expanded in meaning because of thoughtful comments from teachers who interpreted the *i* as a reminder of a learner-centered classroom: All the components in the graphic are intended to engage learners in meaningful and purposeful interactions designed to improve their ability to communicate in the target language and deepen their understanding of themselves and the world. Giving learners the choice to explore aspects of a theme that are of personal interest increases motivation and engagement.

The *i* in the center of the graphic has one final meaning: immersion. In order for learners to increase their abilities to communicate in the target language, there must be meaningful and purposeful use of the target language by both teachers and learners. ACTFL recommends that the target language be used meaningfully and purposefully in the classroom by learners and teachers for 90 percent or more of the class time. A rich target language environment that includes not only the teacher's modeling but also authentic written, oral and visual texts is essential for learners to build their communication skills in order to increase their proficiency in the language. When learners are in a classroom environment where using the target language is the principle means of communication, they know they need to understand the language. Motivation increases when there is a real need that must be met.

The rest of the graphic identifies context and content for meaningful communication. The Venn diagram with three circles surrounding the *i* reflects the interconnectedness of the contexts in which the learners communicate and of the understandings that learners gain. Communication is meaningful when it is personally relevant, helping the learners better understand themselves (Knowing Myself). Communication is meaningful when it relates to the communities to which the learners belong, increasing understanding of those communities (Exploring Communities). Communication is meaningful when it connects to the world to foster interest in, and understanding of, the issues that transcend boundaries (Engaging with the World).

The three modes of communication—Interpretive, Presentational and Interpersonal—are written on the blue watermark of a globe as a reminder that meaningful communication

takes place in the real world with people representing a variety of languages and cultures. The three modes are also intended as reminders that a strong unit of instruction includes practice in all three modes: Each mode “specializes” in different skills that work together to strengthen learners’ ability to communicate.

The five Cs of the World-readiness Standards for Learning Languages—Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, Communities—encircle the blue globe. The five Cs outline broad learning goals to guide the development of world languages curriculum, instruction and assessment. The overarching goal of the five Cs is to prepare learners to apply the communication skills, knowledge and understandings of the standards beyond the classroom to real-world experiences and future careers where global competence is increasingly important. The five Cs encircle the globe to indicate that the learning through the five Cs transcends a single language and culture.

Viewed in its entirety, the graphic represents motivation, content and context that guide the design of curriculum, instruction and assessment of world language programs. Thematic units that are based on the elements in the graphic facilitate learners’ growth in proficiency.

DESIGNING A THEMATIC UNIT TO ENCOURAGE COMMUNICATION

A thematic unit that encourages meaningful practice towards proficiency begins with a question, one designed to prompt curiosity and a desire to know more. Thomas Sizer, in his work with the Coalition of Essential Schools (1992), called these questions designed to encourage exploration and deep thinking “essential” to learning. Essential questions became a fundamental concept of Understanding by Design (UbD) by Wiggins and McTighe (2004). McTighe and Wiggins (2013) state that a thoughtfully crafted essential question guides the learning goals for a unit of instruction, encouraging learners to explore a topic in order to deepen their knowledge and understanding. Adapted from McTighe and Wiggins (2013), a good essential question:

- Is open-ended without a single, final, and correct answer;
- Is cognitively engaging encouraging learners to share thoughts, ideas, additional questions;
- Draws on all levels of thinking in Bloom’s Taxonomy—remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, create; it cannot be answered solely by



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remembering;

- Connects to other disciplines;
- Sparks curiosity and additional questions about the theme;
- Needs evidence and reasons to support opinions and possible responses related to the question, and;
- Can be revisited at more advanced language levels to deepen learners' understanding of the topic or issue.

An important caveat to creating essential questions to guide instruction, especially for novice language learners, is that the learners have to be able to share thoughts and ideas related to the question. Therefore, the questions have to be within the linguistic range of the learners. Good essential questions provoke conversation. If the learners are not able to talk about the question, its purpose is lost in terms of motivating learners to communicate in the target language.

Note that the final characteristic of a good essential question is that it recurs over time. Rather than being focused on, and perhaps frustrated by, what novice learners cannot say, think about the first encounter with an essential question exactly as that: a first encounter. It can be revisited again and again over time as a learner's proficiency in the target language increases. It is important to think about what learners *can* say and understand in their first encounter with the essential question in order to guide the choice of learning experiences for the unit. For example, think of the concept of communities. Essential questions could be created at different levels reflecting both the increased linguistic skills and the developmental level of the learner. Here is a possible spiral:

- Who are the people in my community who help others?
- What makes a community a good place to live?
- How does the history of a community influence the community today?

Note that the theme of communities does not need to be addressed every year but can be revisited periodically as appropriate to the curriculum, the linguistic level, and the interests of the learners. McTighe and Wiggins (2013) remind us that the purpose for asking the question is more important than how it is phrased or how serious it is. They suggest that purpose, audience and impact ultimately determine if a question is "essential."

The question "Who are the people in my community who help others?" is intended to show how a theme can begin with very simple lists of service providers (police officer, firefighter, librarian, teacher, doctor, etc.) and what they do, characteristic of the language of a novice learner, while encouraging the learners to think more deeply beyond the simple vocabulary list to how these people help others. In subsequent years this basic question can be revisited in a way that uses prior knowledge and adds more detailed responses moving the learner to higher levels of proficiency.

Here is what the overview to this thematic unit might include:

Grade Level: First Grade	Language Level: Novice
<i>Theme: Families and Communities</i>	<i>Essential Question: Who are the people in my community who help others?</i>
<i>Topic: Helpers in my Community</i>	
Goals: Learners will be able to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify people by role in their community who help others (police officer, firefighter, etc.) • State where the helpers work in their community • State what the people in their community do to help others • Compare helpers in their community to helpers in (X) 	

Now consider how the final performance assessment for this unit allows learners to demonstrate their communicative abilities to interpret, present and share ideas in response to the essential question. To assess the Interpretive mode, learners could view a video clip or images showing different places in a city in a country where the target language is spoken, then circle images of the helpers who work in the places. In the Presentational mode, learners could prepare a video or series of images identifying different places/helpers in their city and share the presentation with a partner school in a country where the target language is spoken. To assess the Interpersonal mode, learners could work in pairs to create a Venn diagram asking and responding to simple questions as they place images of places/helpers in either the Venn circle for their community, the Venn circle for the community where the target language is spoken, or in the overlap area of the Venn circles indicating that the place/helper is found in both places. Throughout this unit, the learners are developing their understanding of other people and cultures: interculturality.

The interconnectedness of the tasks in three modes strengthens the learners' knowledge and ability to use the target language. The Interpretive mode provides authentic language models and authentic content. The Presentational mode enables learners to work with vocabulary and linguistic patterns in order to create a product that showcases their learning. The Interpersonal mode gives learners the opportunity to share the knowledge and language they have learned with others in an unrehearsed conversation. All three modes work together to increase proficiency among learners.

MEANINGFUL AND PURPOSEFUL LEARNING

With the essential question in place along with the final performance assessment reflecting all three modes of communication, the teacher is able to plan a variety of activities and experiences that give the learners multiple opportunities to practice the target language in meaningful ways. For example, for this thematic unit on communities, the learners might:

- play a matching game where they pair a place in the community with the helper who works there;

- listen to a story about the helpers in a community and what they do;
- place images of different places where helpers work on a map of their community;
- look at a map of a community in another country to find places where helpers work that are similar to the ones in their home community.
- pick a prop or item of clothing that represents a helper in the community and say who they are (ex: I am a bus driver);
- sing a song about the people who are helpers in their community;
- view images of places where helpers work in a community in a country where the target language is spoken and identify who works in the various places;
- create a mural of places in the community where helpers work.

The learning experiences are purposeful in building skills that prepare the learners for the final performance assessment. They are formative in nature, telling teachers and learners how well they are able to understand and use the target language at various points during the unit. These formative assessments help teachers and learners make any needed adjustments such as reteaching, more practice, different types of practice to improve performance.

PERFORMANCE TOWARDS PROFICIENCY

Through the final performance assessment for this unit, the learners demonstrate how well they can interpret authentic oral, written and visual texts, how well they can share their findings with classmates in real conversations, and how successfully they can showcase what they learned through the creation of a product to share with an audience outside the classroom. This performance assessment is a snapshot of how well learners can communicate in the target language on the unit's topic after focused classroom instruction, multiple opportunities to practice the language and ongoing feedback on their communication. Completing several thematic units provides the purposeful practice that learners need in order to increase their proficiency in the target language.

Performance based on these units may be an indicator of a learner's proficiency level.

However, their true proficiency level can best be determined by an outside evaluator specially trained in assessing proficiency. True proficiency is independent of specific classroom instruction, unpracticed and not tied to a single topic. Proficiency reflects sustained performance across all tasks and contexts that are appropriate for that level and, therefore, cannot be determined by one thematic unit. The more meaningful and purposeful practice that learners complete, the stronger their performances will be on individual thematic units as they work toward increasing their proficiency in the language they are learning.

How do you increase proficiency in a world language? Meaningful and purposeful practice, practice, practice.

RESOURCES

Clementi, Donna and Terrill, Laura. *Keys to Planning for Learning*. ACTFL, Alexandria Va. 2013.

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Sizer, Theodore. *Horace's Dilemma*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston. 1984.

Wiggins, Grant and McTighe, Jay. *Understanding by Design*, 2nd edition. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, Va. 2005.

Donna Clementi, PhD, is currently a world languages methods instructor at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisc., and a national consultant specializing in best practices in world language curriculum, instruction, and assessment. In 2013, she co-authored *The Keys to Planning for Learning: Effective Curriculum, Unit, and Lesson Design*, an ACTFL publication. Since 2006, she has been co-leader of the CARLA Summer Institute on Second Language Assessments at the University of Minnesota. Clementi taught French and was the World Languages Program Leader in the Appleton Area School District for 33 years. She also spent 38 summers working at Concordia Language Villages at the French Language Village and leading professional development seminars for world language instructors.

