

# Enough Dissing Already!

## Fostering Connections Between Foreign Language Teachers at the Primary and Secondary levels and Higher Education

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The foreign language education (FLE) field suffers from major “*dis-sing*” between practicing teachers, at the primary and secondary levels, and the post-secondary level. Some words that describe the relationship between the two groups are quite *dis*quieting: *Distrust*, *disinterest*, *disrespect*, *discontent*, and *disconnect*. Although both groups should work together in a symbiotic relationship for the good of the profession, the “dissing” of which we speak has prevailed. In this position paper, viewing the situation as culture clash between various subcultures of the larger FLE culture, we offer examples of successful articulation initiatives and suggestions for facilitating interaction between the two groups.<sup>1</sup>

### **Recognizing Divergent Subcultures**

Like any culture, the FLE culture encompasses different sub-cultures. While some overlap exists between the groups, their distinct practices, products, and perspectives reflect the realities of their particular environments.<sup>2</sup> For example, primary and secondary school teachers generally have heavy teaching loads and must remain on-site for the duration of the school day. Furthermore, many school districts limit the number of professional development days devoted to foreign language topics. Consequently, this group often lacks time and opportunities for information sharing with colleagues. Furthermore, they may have limited access to libraries to learn about the latest research findings and methods. In addition, they often feel constrained by set curricula that may not allow for experimentation with new methods. Conversely, teachers in institutions of higher education (IHEs) usually have more freedom built into their “work culture”. With the exception of teaching and office hours, generally, they are not obligated to remain on-site. Moreover, university professors have more flexibility in canceling or rescheduling classes if the need should arise. Additionally, they have access to campus libraries. However, their time constraints are two-fold. They are expected to teach and to produce and present quality research in their areas of specialty, which may not necessarily relate to foreign language pedagogy. The two subgroups also experience differences in other areas, e.g.: student needs, physical resources, class-schedules, and materials. Clearly, these factors influence teaching practices and ideas regarding them. For example, faculty members of IHEs often express the need for autonomy, stating that they do not want anybody to tell them “how or what to teach” and that they do not believe that they should modify their teaching “just to show prospective teachers how they want them to go out and teach.” On the other hand, prospective teachers and those who hire them expect that they learn this information during their preparation. Their conflicting interests and demands give rise to problems when the two subcultures come into contact.

### **Restructuring the Knowledge Hierarchy**

Despite the “cultural” differences between these groups, they need each other. Customarily, IHEs rely upon practicing teachers at the primary and

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secondary levels to provide them students who are adequately prepared for their programs. In return, IHEs offer training for pre-service teachers and professional development for practicing teachers. Perhaps the nature of this exchange exacerbates the problem. It encourages a trickle down model of information sharing that promotes erroneous notions of practicing teachers in the primary and secondary schools as “passive recipients” who wait for the “intellectuals” who are “disconnected from the realities of the trenches” to provide them information about teaching and learning. In reality, members of both groups have much to offer the profession. Practicing teachers at the primary and secondary level are aware of practical issues and constraints that must be considered when developing new methods. Conversely, educators and researchers at IHEs have more freedom with which to experiment and explore new methodologies. By collaborating, members of the two groups can pool their resources to promote knowledge construction about foreign language learning.

We can, for example, look to current themes in education as a model for restructuring the knowledge hierarchy. Constructivism has gained popularity among educators. This view of learning assumes individuals are active participants in the knowledge construction process.<sup>3</sup> We embrace constructivist teaching in our classrooms but generally fail to adopt this model of knowledge construction for our own professional purposes. Rather, for the most part, we maintain a traditional paradigm in which the IHEs “bestow” knowledge upon primary and secondary school teachers. We must adopt a model in which all participants play an active role and are recognized as knowledgeable contributors. In fact, some school systems, educational organizations, and IHEs have already initiated the process. In the next section of this paper, we highlight some creative attempts at revamping the knowledge construction and sharing hierarchy, at both the systemic and individual levels.

### ***Promoting Systemic Change***

- Finding a common language

The Standards for Foreign Language Learning provide a point of departure from which to base communication between the two groups. Already, the national standards have impacted state standards throughout the nation. Consequently, practicing and pre-service teachers are interested in learning how to best meet these pedagogical goals. Naturally, the rules of supply and demand will drive change.<sup>4</sup> Prospective students who

intend to pursue a teaching career will gravitate towards programs that prepare them for state exams and criteria. Consequently, the IHEs will have to modify their teacher training programs to include this information. Clearly, they would benefit by learning from practicing teachers who possess valuable information about primary and secondary FLE. The five C’s: Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities, provide a common language with which the two groups can communicate.

- Starting Conversations

By bringing members of the two groups together to share their beliefs about and goals for language learning, we can initiate dialogues that pinpoint common interests and common goals. In fact, several attempts to start conversations between the two groups have already yielded positive results. One venue that has facilitated discussion is the Bulletin of the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages. In 2000, they devoted two issues to forums on the standards. Viewpoints representing the primary and secondary levels and the tertiary level were present.<sup>5</sup> Another successful initiative, sponsored by the Languages Other Than English Center for Educator Development (LOTE CED)<sup>6</sup>, introduced educators at IHEs in Texas to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Languages Other Than English (TEKS for LOTE). Session topics included implications for the classroom, performance-based assessment, and incorporation of knowledge about the TEKS for LOTE and TEKS-based instruction in teacher training programs. Participants also shared questions, concerns, and their perspectives. In this case, the LOTE CED served as an intermediary who presented the needs of potential primary and secondary school teachers to university professors. In another initiative, members of the two groups met face to face. A project, organized by the Modern Language Association and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, brought together primary and secondary school teachers, foreign language professors, and teacher educators. Project organizers helped participants develop long-term task-based encounters with one another. Based on their experiences, they offer suggestions for successful articulation, including, self-knowledge, an understanding of other groups’ perspectives, and knowledge of the task at hand.<sup>7</sup>

Information generated by projects like the two listed above can lead to dynamic joint ventures between primary and secondary foreign language teachers and those at IHEs.

- Collaboration

Collaborative research between teachers at the primary and secondary levels and those at IHEs holds much promise. It can lead to intellectual stimulation, increased feelings of connectedness, practical knowledge of what works with specific groups, and the development of pedagogically sound teaching methods and materials. Ideally, these advantages would provide the impetus for action. However, such projects must have more immediate rewards. After all, they create work for everybody involved.

Administrators at both levels should offer incentives to promote interest in collaborating in action research. For example, they might provide release time to allow for the development of quality research studies and the publication and/or presentation of the results. State departments of education and school systems should offer credit towards professional development obligations. Such enticements might promote more joint projects in the vein of the ones listed below.

The Partners in Pedagogy program paired college faculty with high school teachers to team-teach introductory French and Spanish courses at the Plattsburgh State University of New York. The researchers reported that the project resulted in greater articulation and understanding between the high school teachers and college faculty.<sup>8</sup>

The Glastonbury Public Schools and two departments at the University of Connecticut (UCONN), The Department of Modern and Classical Languages, and the Department of Curriculum and Instruction joined forces on an articulation project. The project, two-fold, focused on mutual understanding activities and a survey of former Glastonbury foreign language students who were studying languages at UCONN at the time.<sup>9</sup> The University has changed many of its practices in response to the findings. The group has also received federal funding to conduct a large-scale study on a similar topic.

While these projects, aimed at fostering change at the systemic level, are valuable, they require a significant amount of time for planning, organization, and realization. Individual educators can cultivate the relationship between the two groups through less complex endeavors.

### ***Promoting Change Individually***

Since the articulation issue concerns communicating and connecting with members of

the other "culture," individuals can also play an active role in initiating and sustaining dialogues with members of the other group. In this section, we propose ideas for increasing articulation at the individual level.

Student teachers provide rich opportunities for contact. Educators responsible for teacher training at IHEs and cooperating teachers can join together with the common goal of training a future educator. Cooperating teachers, university faculty, and the student teachers should meet for information sharing and brainstorming sessions. These opportunities for interchange could eventually lead to designing and implementing joint action research projects, which focus on practical problem solving, expand scientific knowledge, and develop the competencies of the people involved.

A second point of contact, the Internet, presents numerous opportunities for contact between the two groups. Teachers at the primary and secondary level can initiate conversations regarding subjects of interest with those at IHEs through on-line forums like FLTEACH<sup>10</sup> and LingNet.<sup>11</sup> Interested members at IHEs or third party organizations should create on-line professional development courses, following models of successful initiatives in other teaching domains, namely math, science, and instructional technology. Essentially, with the aid of technology, teachers at the primary and secondary levels can easily connect with one another and with those at the tertiary level. As members of the FLE culture, we must use technological resources to reach out to others with common interests.

### ***Talking the Talk and Walking the Walk***

While it is easy for us to complain about the "other," the dissing that has plagued our profession does not benefit the field. On the contrary, it results in hard feelings, a lack of articulation, and a lack of cooperation between educators at the primary and secondary levels and those at IHEs.

As foreign language educators, we all understand the importance of cultural awareness. The members of the two subcultures have common goals, e.g., developing critical thinking skills and using the target language for communicative purposes. Even if our means of attaining those goals are different, in the spirit of cultural sensitivity, we should respect one another's motivations, strategies, and abilities and use each other's strengths. Essentially, we must develop

better communication and cooperation between the two groups as we strive to learn more about foreign language learning and teaching.

The National Standards For Foreign Language Learning have prompted much discussion about articulation between primary and secondary teachers and professors at the IHEs. This paper outlined a few pro-active efforts that strive to reorganize the existing knowledge distribution hierarchy that has encouraged this dissing of which we spoke in this paper. It is now time to take action. If we are going to talk the talk, we should also walk the walk.

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- <sup>1</sup> The term *articulation* has many connotations. In this paper, our definition refers specifically to facilitating information sharing between practicing teachers in primary and secondary institutions and the IHEs.
  - <sup>2</sup> For an in-depth analysis of cultural differences between the two subgroups, see Joan Kelly Hall's article in the ADFL Bulletin. (28, no. 2)
  - <sup>3</sup> You can read more about Constructivism at: <http://www.sedl.org/pubs/tec26/nonflash/intro2c.html>
  - <sup>4</sup> To read more about how the Standards are impacting higher education., see the ADFL bulletin, Vol. 31. No.2. Winter 2000.
  - <sup>5</sup> These issues of the ADFL Bulletin are available on-line. <http://www.ade.org/adfl/bulletin/V31n1/toc/311toc.htm> and <http://www.ade.org/adfl/bulletin/V31N2/toc/312toc.htm>
  - <sup>6</sup> The LOTE CED's mission is to help local school districts and foreign language educators implement Texas' content and performance standards for foreign language students.
  - <sup>7</sup> This project is described in the ADFL Bulletin, 28, no. 2: 26-30 and can also be found on-line at <http://www.ade.org/adfl/bulletin/v28n2/282026.htm>.
  - <sup>8</sup> Read more about this project on-line. ([http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC\\_Digests/ed435186.html](http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed435186.html))
  - <sup>9</sup> See the article in the UCONN Advance (October 25, 1999) or <http://vm.uconn.edu/~advance/10259911.htm>
  - <sup>10</sup> <http://www.cortland.edu/www/flteach/articles/networking.html>
  - <sup>11</sup> <http://www.lingnet.org/>

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