

## Action Research: Reseeing Learning and Rethinking Practice in the LOTE Classroom

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### Professional Development and the LOTE Teacher

No area of education is as complex and challenging as the professional development of practicing teachers. The need for participation in valid and useful professional development opportunities is clearly articulated in several national standards documents, such as the Model Standards for Licensing Beginning Foreign Language Teachers (INTASC), the Program Standards for the Preparation of Foreign Language Teachers (ACTFL), and the World Languages other than English Standards (NBPTS). Despite the strong recommendation of these national organizations for continual professional development, efforts to educate and renew practicing foreign language teachers are largely assigned to periodic workshops and yearly professional conference attendance. Research on teacher education has shown repeatedly that the benefits gained from one-day "how-to" workshops are limited and transitory. Thus, a critical question is how can teachers engage in on-going professional development in ways that make a difference to their practice, connect to their lives as teachers, and ultimately improve learning and instruction. Closely connected to this issue is finding ways to create self-renewing opportunities for teachers to participate in this substantive form of professional development given the demands and time-intensive nature of teaching in American public schools.

### Action Research and the LOTE Teacher

One area that has recently been seen as potentially useful for weaving long-term professional development into the lives of teachers is the establishment of *action research networks* in schools, districts, and states. In this way, teachers form communities of collaboration and change (Fullan, 2000) through the examination of their own classrooms. Through the action research process, teachers investigate closely a self-selected area of interest with a view towards seeing learning in a new light and thinking in alternate ways about instruction. This process, far from burdensome, is linked directly to the lives of teachers, is centrally situated in their classrooms, and is constituted through their interactions with students. Action research means innovation and change through on-going collaborative dialogue with colleagues in an effort to see teaching and learning in new ways and improve student learning. Action research is conducted *by* teachers, not merely *on* teachers by researchers who often lack knowledge of daily life in classrooms.

This paper reports on a one-year-long, innovative professional development project for Texas LOTE teachers that was initiated by the Languages Other Than English Center for Educator Development (LOTE CED) at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory in Austin, Texas. During the 2002-2003 academic year, ten Texas LOTE teachers and a state LOTE supervisor explored action research as a tool for deepening professional knowledge and improving foreign language instruction in the context of their own schools and classrooms. I was fortunate to be a part of this action research institute and to work with a highly committed group of accomplished teachers. In my capacity as consultant,

The Communiqué is published by the Languages Other Than English Center for Educator Development

Editor: Elaine Phillips  
Layout Editor: Chuck Reese

— Issue 8 —  
May 2003

I presented the concept of action research to the teachers, engaged them in discussions of issues worthy of investigation, and outlined a process in which their concerns and issues could be examined systematically with data. Dr. Elaine Phillips, Director of the LOTE CED and the Action Research Initiative Director, monitored the teachers' research throughout the year by requiring periodic electronic reports of the projects and responding to them in ways that probed and deepened the teachers' studies. This on-going contact provided the momentum that prevented professional inertia and kept the projects moving forward.

### **The Action Research Process**

The 4-part model for organizing the projects was drawn from the literature on action research and involved a cycle of *thinking, acting, reflecting, and rethinking* (Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, 1988; Mills, 2003; Stringer, 1996; Wallace, 2000; Burnaford, Fischer, & Hobson, 2001; Hopkins, 1993; Hartman, 1998; Freeman, 1988; Burns, 1999; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Through this model, the teachers were introduced to the tools of action research. During our initial two-day meeting in September 2002, teachers explored *thinking tools* in the form of areas of focus and research questions. The teachers discovered that research involves a clear area of focus and questions that permit rich descriptions rather than naïve comparison of methods or materials. Additionally they learned that the best research always grows out of situations that are within their locus of control, that they feel passionate about, and that they would like to change or improve.

The process of identifying an area of focus and establishing researchable questions is far from neutral and requires an intimate relationship with one's beliefs about teaching, the nature of language and learning, and the learners. Identifying an instructional problem or puzzle always leads to confronting one's own values and beliefs about the relationship of theory, practice, and schooling and the effectiveness of one's own work as a teacher. A critical component of action research is reconnaissance, or the recognition of one's own contribution to creating positive educational change or maintaining mediocre or ineffective practice. As the teachers explored their areas of focus and wrote their research questions, a community of research and change was forged. In these sessions, we grew together professionally and personally, as colleagues and friends, and learned how to respect and accept each other's divergent experiences and opinions.

Once research questions were established, we discussed the *actions* that needed to be taken to answer these questions. The teachers learned that answers to questions could be found by collecting data through personal experience, inquiry into their classrooms, and a systematic examination of teaching practice and student learning (Mills 2003). The *tools of inquiry* they explored as data collection techniques involved direct participant observation of their own instruction and learners; the use of surveys, interviews, and questionnaires; and the examination of existing documents such as lesson plans, videotapes, grades, journals, questionnaires, interviews, and student work samples. We discussed the importance of multiple perspectives on an issue. We concluded that no single research instrument or test can capture the complexity of instruction and that data need to be triangulated to be credible and valid. We also became familiar with the genre of action research and contrasted action research to laboratory studies where careful control of variables is required and generalization of findings is the desired outcome. In action research, investigations of teaching and learning shift from the controlled laboratory setting to the uncontrollable and unpredictable life of a classroom. Consequently, action research findings give way to locally constructed knowledge of one's own students, classroom, and foreign language program.

Based on these discussions and distinctions, the Texas teachers left the session ready to begin their studies of their lives as teachers and the world of language learning of their students. Armed with a well-focused area for investigation and research questions that could be answered using a variety of classroom-based research tools, the teachers returned to the classroom prepared to initiate their projects, to collect information, and to make new discoveries. As the year progressed, the teachers were instructed on analyzing the data and drawing interpretations through direct reference to the information they had collected. Findings and conclusions, as will be noted in the studies below, were based on actual evidence rather than anecdote.

What follows are the teachers' own accounts of their action research projects. Each report follows a similar format and provides information on the purpose of the study, research questions, discoveries and findings, and instructional actions to be taken in the future. After the teachers' reports, the emerging themes, areas of professional concern, and future plans revealed in the studies will be presented.

## **Native Lands Gigi Austin, Dallas ISD**

**Purpose of the study.** I am an experienced English teacher who, at the start of this saga, was inexperienced at teaching Spanish to talented and gifted middle school students. I willingly chose to change subjects and grade levels and can now say I am glad that I did. Much transpired between that choice and “gladness,” however. This happy ending did not have a very happy beginning.

At week five of the current school year, my request to have my level two Spanish students sorted into native speaker and nonnative speaker classes backfired. It would have been a perfect divide since I have seventeen native speakers and forty-some nonnative speakers (three classes of seventeen). Due to scheduling conflicts, however, such a perfect divide was not possible. Schedule changes closed, and I was left to teach a beginner level Spanish II class of *sixteen* fluent Spanish speakers and *six* Anglo boys who were struggling to remember from last year how to count to one hundred in Spanish. As I saw it, I was about to be spread thinly into oblivion or snapped in half.

I had no doubt that the natives could already pass the final exam for the course before they stepped foot in the room. That is not to say they have nothing to learn about the language and culture. The issue was simply that the curriculum was not designed for their needs. The six Anglos, on the other hand, would need every bit of instruction and attention I could afford them. My priorities would obviously have to be with them.

**Research Questions.** The question then became, how do I teach these two groups simultaneously? What do I *do* with the natives? I had no materials for them nor the time to create any. Trying to just keep them busy and force-feeding them the Level II curriculum resulted in negative attitudes, low grades, and discipline problems—all of which had me at my wits’ end. I was angry, frustrated, afraid, and increasingly discouraged. It seemed as though no one understood why I felt this was a problem. After all, most teachers have to teach multi-level classes to some extent, and so my situation was the norm rather than a special case. Good teachers know how to meet their students’ needs and handle discipline problems, right? I started buying into the idea that the problem was not my circumstances but rather my inability to handle them.

**Data Collection and Findings.** Knowledge set me free. I began reading everything I could get my hands on about teaching native speakers. My hunches were verified, and soon I realized that I was not the problem after all. Everything I read indicated that, not only is it pedagogically unsound to teach the two groups together, but to

teach a mother tongue as if it were a foreign language is a paved road to failure. It is common (and logical) for native speakers in a foreign language setting to have low grades and develop negative attitudes.

After gloating in the joy of being right, I went about the business of trying to make lemonade with my basket of lemons. I created some surveys in an attempt to find out how the natives felt about the class and what they wanted to learn and then, quite frankly, did nothing with the information because I had no time to create a curriculum from it. Next, I started gathering strategies from other teachers, books, workshops, and my imagination and then tried them out day by day, reflecting on their effectiveness in a dialogue journal. As the summary below indicates, some were more successful than others, but all were valuable in that I learned as much from what did *not* work as from what did.

***“Trying to just keep them busy and force-feeding them the Level II curriculum resulted in negative attitudes, low grades, and discipline problems, all of which had me at my wits’ end.”***

The most common advice I received about how to teach the two groups was to use the natives as tutors. I tried this in various forms. One-on-one worked for correcting tests and assignments but was not useful for the presentation of new material. Also, I only had a handful of students who genuinely wanted to tutor. On one occasion, I assigned each group of three natives an Anglo to tutor, and then had the Anglos compete against one another in a game show. Everyone enjoyed the game part of it, but it was clear to me that the contestants had not been well prepared. My conclusion about peer tutoring is that it can only be effective if the native has a sincere interest in learning and teaching.

Another strategy I tried was to have a group of natives teach a culture section for each unit. I carefully planned the assignment, modeling it and providing oral and written instructions with a grading rubric. The first few weeks, I thought I had struck gold because while the natives were working in the library and computer lab, I was able to teach the others without so many distractions. Their final products, though, were of very poor quality, and I attribute it to not being able to coach them along the way. Who knows? With a different group of kids, this strategy may have produced splendid results.

**Plan of Action.** A month or so ago I got the wonderful news that my school will be piloting a middle school native speaker program for our district. The textbooks and materials have already arrived, and I am trying out the placement tests on

my current students. Perseverance paid off. I am leaving this research experience with a renewed commitment to the profession and deep sense of gratitude to Elaine Phillips, Rick Donato, and my ARI project mates for pouring the sugar into my lemonade and helping me stir.

### **Integrative Teaching Cesiah Boryczka, Northside ISD**

**Purpose of the Study.** For decades, the pattern of learning a language has been to focus on four basic skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. More recently, foreign language teachers also focus on other competencies, namely, the “5 Cs”: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. The traditional, four basic skills do not stand alone. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are essential to communication, but students are also expected to learn about and experience other cultures, use the new language to connect to other disciplines, and gain a deeper understanding of their own language and culture as they become active participants in the different celebrations of the community. Studies have concluded that, when students see the connections in the different disciplines of their course work, their learning is empowered across the curriculum. As part of educational reform in the core areas, interdisciplinary instruction and integrated curricula have been widely used. I believe that International Languages teachers can organize units of instruction to establish collaboration and build visibility and support among their colleagues, as well as provide the best opportunity for intellectual growth to the students.

The purpose of the study was to examine the effect of interdisciplinary teaching on student performance as evidenced in the end product (poem), student/teacher satisfaction, and attitude. I sought to learn how students perceive and react to the professional interaction and collaboration between their Spanish teacher and her colleague, an English teacher, as they teamed to introduce a unit of poetry. A second goal was to engage the students themselves in the development of the lesson to determine whether or not this procedure is effective or ineffective.

**Research Questions.** My project was designed to answer the following question: What will be the effect of an interdisciplinary teaching unit on students’ performance as evidenced by the end product (an original poem), on student/teacher satisfaction, and on attitudes?

**Data Collection and Findings.** To gather information on the effects of this interdisciplinary approach, I collaborated with an English teacher in my school to develop a poetry unit. I also examined the students’ final products and the results of a survey questioning their attitudes about the unit. To begin, the students were introduced to major poets of Spain and Latin America, first

researching them in the library, followed by an analysis of their poetry. Students developed an awareness and understanding of poetry and poetic figures through a variety of activities such as talking with parents and grandparents about childhood rhymes and songs, creating visuals to represent the songs, studying odes and poems by famous authors, etc. On day three of the unit, the English teacher taught a lesson on odes in which students read works by Neruda-Esque, discussed their characteristics, brainstormed topics and structural elements, and did a creative writing assignment. On day five, she returned to help students revise their original odes and demonstrate what they had learned by presenting them to the class.\*

The 22 students had different levels of experience and proficiency in Spanish. Two were recent immigrants from Mexico who spoke little or no English, 4 were of Mexican parents and their first language was Spanish, 2 were white-Anglo, 3 were African-American, 11 were Mexican-American. Consequently, to avoid discouragement in the less proficient learner, I teamed them with the more proficient students during the cooperative activities. For each activity inside and outside of the classroom, the students were provided with the objectives and expectations which enabled them to set realistic goals for class participation.

For the end product (the ode), the students had the freedom to choose the topic or theme reflecting their interest which, in turn, increased their satisfaction and motivated them to achieve their goal. I felt the end product was a success because all 22 students created an ode, even the few who felt they had wasted their time. The brainstorming and discussion of themes engaged the students in activities that were not superficial. Instead, they empowered the students and gave them the confidence to succeed. It is not easy for students to show their feelings and emotions. They felt vulnerable, they took risks, and their efforts appear in the final product. The products reflect both their satisfaction and my satisfaction as a teacher.

Other evidence gathered for the research included the student survey mentioned above. The Student Feedback Form consisted of two sections. The first was a set of ten statements that aimed to determine student attitudes toward interdisciplinary teaching and to find out if students perceived a difference in the manner the subject matter was delivered. Students were asked to rate each statement on a scale of 1-5 (least important to most important). Results for categories 1 and 2 and categories 4 and 5 were combined and numbers were rounded for reporting purposes in the figure (facing page).

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\*The poems have been published on the Warren High School Web site under International Languages (Mrs. Cesiah Boryczka). *La Comunidad*, the student newspaper of Communications Arts High School also published some of the poems.

The second section of the Student Feedback Form encouraged the students to express their opinions in response to three statements concerning whether or not they liked the activities, the effectiveness of the activities on their understanding of the material, and how they felt they had benefited. When asked to explain why they liked these activities or not, students commented: "I enjoyed writing about my interests," "I got to do something I enjoyed," "Allowed to open doors of creativity," "Chance to express my thoughts," "It is not book work," and "Enjoyed the poetry." Two students had less positive responses: "I do not like poetry" and "Did not teach me anything new." Student responses to the second statement indicated that the activity had increased their understanding of new vocabulary, how to express their feelings, and similarities between Spanish and English. One student said, "It did not increase my understanding of anything." The final item asked learners to complete the sentence *This activity increased my ability to...* Answers included: "Explore different feelings of poetry," "Be open minded," "Understand poetry of another language and culture," "Have more imagination," and "I disliked it. I did not learn any more Spanish than when I started."

Even though the students were apprehensive at the beginning of the project, from the responses to the statements of the survey, it is obvious that most were pleased with their performance and had positive views on the benefits of interdisciplinary teaching. They felt comfortable with the collaboration of the teachers, although a few students expressed dissatisfaction ("A waste of our time"). A possible explanation is that studying poetry reminded the native speakers of their own experience and failure in an English course.

**Plan of Action.** I will give a presentation on interdisciplinary teaching for my district in the month of June, and I am ready to work with the art teacher on a fascinating unit on the Mexican muralists. I am also participating in a professional development program in my district, a 40-hour computer course conducted with the collaboration of two corporations. This program works on the premise that technology is here to enhance our teaching. As part of the program, I will create units and lesson plans that are interdisciplinary in nature and provide ample opportunities to collaborate with other disciplines.

	Not Important	Neutral	Important
1. Integrative teaching provided an environment that encouraged my creativity.	5%	36%	59%
2. Integrative teaching encouraged my intellectual curiosity.	19%	36%	46%
3. The method of instruction enabled me to be aware of the collaboration of my teacher with her colleague/s. (One student did not respond.)	14%	32%	50%
4. I felt comfortable with this method of instruction.	14%	32%	55%
5. Keeping the dialectical notes helped me understand the material. (One student did not respond.)	54%	14%	27%
6. I learned new vocabulary, and I can apply what I learned in my other classes and /or the community. (One student did not respond.)	5%	36%	54%
7. The teacher's instructions were clear, and the instructions on the materials and activities were clear.	10%	27%	63%
8. I had enough time to do the activities, and I was provided a variety of opportunities to be evaluated fairly.	5%	14%	82%
9. I observed similarities and/or differences between my own culture and the culture I am studying. (Five students did not respond.)	0%	41%	36%
10. I achieved a high level of satisfaction.	5%	36%	59%

## Customizing Curriculum to Address Standards Monica Daucourt, Dallas ISD

**Purpose of the Study.** The purpose of this study was to investigate if standards for foreign language learners can be met while at the same time addressing student motivation and interest in real-world topics and tasks so that they can be more successful in the classroom. More specifically, can curriculum be customized to student interest and still address the standards set by districts, the state, and the profession?

**Research Questions.** What real-world topics are of high interest to my students? What do they want to learn to do with the language? Can I design lessons that are pertinent to their lives and reflect both their interests and the standards for foreign language learners?

**Data Collection and Findings.** I used both classroom discussion and surveys to communicate with my students about their attitudes toward language learning and its relevance, their primary areas of interest, and their goals for language learning. I began with a guided discussion session in which the class brainstormed why one might study a foreign language, what are the benefits of learning another language, and how it is important in their world—both internationally and personally—with regard to professional opportunities.

*“Rather than simply experiencing a unit on adjectives and adjective agreement, for example, students were motivated to use the vocabulary and structures they studied in order to meet their personal communication objectives.”*

I then administered a survey asking about students' interests and expectations for the class. Students completed the questionnaire individually, then worked in cooperative groups of four to share, discuss, and compile their ideas. The group work was followed by more whole-class brainstorming and discussion as the groups reported and then came to a consensus on their top interests and priorities for the class. The discussion produced some ideas about ways to put the language they acquired to use. The first survey was followed by a discussion in which I talked with them about specific objectives for language learning related to oral and written comprehension and expression and cultural, political, and historical issues. We talked about why these objectives are important and how they might be applied. I felt the students had a true sense of ownership in this discussion. The second questionnaire asked students to list, in order of importance to them personally, some ways in

which we might go about meeting the standards *and* their personal goals. They were to indicate resources and tasks that they would find of greatest interest.

The results on the first questionnaire were similar for all three classes (French I, French II, and French III-IV). In response to the first question, *What do you think about most?*, students overwhelmingly listed social/family relationships and the opposite sex. In response to a question about what they wanted most from their foreign language study, they indicated they wanted to increase their ability to converse socially in French. They were also interested in developing a more sophisticated understanding of another culture. Regarding the final question, *How can your interests and expectations be useful?*, students wanted to use the language to gain a competitive edge professionally, to increase their global awareness, for personal fulfillment, and for travel. The second questionnaire asked students about means of making language learning more authentic, more related to their interests and goals. They indicated they would like to use authentic texts from radio, television, magazines and newspapers, letters from pen pals and chat rooms, and popular music. They wanted skills to communicate with members of the target culture, to travel (understand tour guides, ask questions, understand responses), and to write letters to businesses and universities.

With input gathered from discussions and surveys, classroom activities were developed to help students meet the goals they had identified. For example, students increased their ability to communicate socially by creating sample personal ads in which they described themselves, their interests, and why they would like to meet other students (tennis partner, studying, movies, etc.). The ads were coded with an identification number and were posted for all classes to read. By the end of the unit, each student had produced responses to a number of personal ads and had replied to an equal number of correspondents. Rather than simply experiencing a unit on adjectives and adjective agreement, for example, students were motivated to use the vocabulary and structures they studied in order to meet their personal communication objectives. Students in the advanced class were similarly motivated as they acquired key marketing/educational vocabulary through correspondence with French businesses and universities. The new units proved very successful. In French II, for example, all students eagerly wrote their original personal ad and at least 5-10 responses to various ads done by their classmates. The business letters done by the upper level students were also very successful with 100% participation.

**Plan of Action.** I learned that it pays in enthusiasm and participation to modify my curriculum to meet needs that students perceive as authentic and of interest. I believe I must become a diagnostician to determine what my

students experience at home, where their interests lie, who they are, and how I can help them contribute to society. I found students were more involved and more successful when they were engaged in something purposeful; this study affirms my ability to create lessons that match students' interests and goals and which reflect standards for foreign language learners. In the future, I intend to involve all levels so that this will be a totally vertical activity.

## Student Choice in Assessment Greg Foulds, North East ISD

**Purpose of the Study.** The purpose of this study was to give students choices in the ways in which they are assessed and in the types of assessments used to evaluate their proficiency in Spanish. This topic is of particular importance to me because even after eleven years of teaching Spanish at the secondary level, I still feel that, more often than not, students end up showing me what they do *not* know rather than what they *do*. I want them to be able to demonstrate what they have actually learned.

**Research Questions.** With this goal in mind, I wanted to answer three questions in my research: 1) What would happen if students were given choices in assessment? 2) Do the tests imitate the way that we have been practicing in class? 3) How will the students measure success?

**Data Collection and Findings.** I chose to conduct my action research with 67 Spanish II Pre-AP students (three classes). The project included an examination of pre- and post-test survey results and a comparison of scores from two student-generated tests with scores from a teacher-generated test. I used the first semester of the 2002-2003 school year to orient my students to the state-adopted textbook and state standards for language learners, the way in which I teach, the types of tests that are given (textbook publisher exams), and the expectations that I have for them as language learners. In January 2003, I told my students that I was going to research some ways in which I could help them improve their Spanish. Together, we would specifically target how students could better perform for me and how they would measure success if they were given a chance to have input in the assessment process. My students seemed interested in the idea, even though at that time we still were not sure what it would look like.

I began with a reflective survey to see how the students felt about assessment in general and in the Spanish class in particular. Most students (74%) felt somewhat comfortable with our current assessment procedure, and 80% agreed that the way we practiced Spanish in class matched the way in which they were being tested. However, 87% also supported making *some* changes to the

evaluation process as a whole. Once the survey results had been tallied, I told students that for the next four weeks, they would be given the opportunity to design their own assessments.

Each time we reached another evaluation point in our studies, I placed the students in groups of three or four where they brainstormed how they wanted to be evaluated, deciding on the content and format of each test. For example, we had been studying a past tense in Spanish, so I told them that they needed to show me they had learned how to conjugate verbs in the preterit as well as to be able to recognize and use these forms in communicating. Once all the ideas had been shared, the class decided on specific ways to demonstrate their proficiency. As a class, students also decided that they would measure success by the grades they had earned, by whether they were able to correct and learn from their mistakes, and by whether they felt they could repeat the performance. The test development procedure was repeated after we had finished studying informal commands in Spanish. At the end of both units, each class generated its own unique test to assess their knowledge and skills. In both cases, the process led to a student-generated, pencil-and-paper test that included items that were not altogether different from items that I might have created for them myself! Their tests included word banks with fill-in-the-blank items, short speaking sections, kinesthetic activities (responding to a command), small writing/translation items, and items that asked students to decide if things were correct or incorrect. At no time did I tell them they had to have written tests, nor did I tell them that they had to choose from any particular test format(s). I simply acted as a facilitator and helped them verbalize and realize a test of their own.

Finally, I gave students a third assessment, a textbook test (TBT) covering the same materials (preterit and informal commands) included on the two student-generated tests (SGT). I was then able to compare their test scores on the three evaluations. The number of students in each class that passed (grade of 70 or better) the student-generated tests was essentially (with one exception) the same number as those that passed the traditional assessment:

Class	SGT Preterit	SGT Commands	TBT Pret. & Commands
A (N=21)	57%	48%	50%
B (N=21)	91%	72%	76.5%
C (N=25)	72%	70%	79%

Although scores for student-generated exams were not consistently higher than those on the textbook test, students in classes A and B both scored better on one of the student-generated assessments, and the other

scores were not considerably lower than those on the third exam. It is also possible that students may have felt a bit more empowered in the process of deciding on their own assessments. Although they indicated that they favored a change in the way assessments had been given, as two students put it, “I’ve learned that even if students design the assessments it can still be hard,” and “Students realized that they still have to study for tests, even if it’s their own.”

I also found the results of the post-experiment survey very interesting. Ninety-two percent believed that their assessments matched the way we practice in class and that their language skills had improved. Eighty-eight percent of students liked the changes made in the evaluation process and did not wish to return to the textbook tests. Ninety-four percent felt that the experiment had been both successful and valuable. Of how he had measured success, one student said, “I have actually learned the material instead of just knowing the basics for the test,” and another commented, “I can see an improvement in not only my grades, but in my esteem, and I feel better in taking tests.”

My students and I all learned a great deal in the process of this research. The overwhelming majority of my students feel that their voice mattered, that they were successful, and that the process was a rewarding and valuable one. There was a small number of students who did not enjoy the process and did not feel that it was overly successful simply because they felt uncomfortable making their own tests and felt that the teacher knew more about instruction and teaching than they did. One student commented, “Student designed assessments benefit some students greatly; however, others would rather be told what to do.” Many students have never been given the type of freedom that I allowed my students and, frankly, I think it intimidated them and may have even scared a few.

**Plan of Action.** It is hard to make such changes in one’s teaching and return to the status quo, even after just a few weeks of “thinking outside of the box.” Consequently, I plan to continue allowing students the opportunity to give input into the evaluation process for the express purpose of being able to show me what they really can do in the language. I plan to give them the opportunity to correct their work and learn from their mistakes while giving them the chance to improve their grades. Now that dialogue has begun and my students and I openly communicate about their assessments, we will be able to continue the negotiation process that will ultimately benefit all students. For example, I now believe that my students generated traditional types of assessments because that is what they know and are familiar with. Therefore, I want to expand my students’ vision and lead them to more real-world, authentic types of assessment so

they can apply what they have learned in ways that are meaningful to them.

This action research project was frustrating because it led my students and me into uncharted waters, but it was also intriguing for the very same reason. I feel that I have learned an enormous amount about instruction in the classroom, about myself as an educator, about my students as learners of a language not their own, and about the give-and-take that exists in all human relationships. This process has helped me grow as an individual and has helped reinforce my personal conviction that teaching is a difficult, yet noble and rewarding life-calling.

### **Getting Middle-Schoolers to Talk... in Spanish! Pat Kahn, Round Rock ISD**

**Purpose of the Study.** Middle school kids talk *all* the time, except when you want them to. Every time I have gone to conferences, the other teachers praise their classes on the wonderful job they do on the 2-minute mini-conversations in the book or the situation scenarios that accompany the text. Mine talk during the mini-dialogues, all right—about what they ate for lunch, what they are going to wear tomorrow, who’s hot, who’s not, etc. They converse very nicely, in English, on every subject but the one at hand. They also moan and groan about the situation scenarios, saying they are “boring.” Consequently, I sit tight-lipped and listen to all the other foreign language teachers gloat.

The speaking component is one of the five goal areas set by national and state standards, *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* and *Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Languages Other than English*. So my interest in getting my students to talk is not only to save face or get the students ready for high school. This is one of the steps that I must cover in my area of curriculum. So, my action research project involved getting the students to carry on some sort of dialogue in Spanish on a topic that would interest them.

**Research Questions.** The question I wanted answered was: How can I find ways to motivate reluctant or resistant students in interpersonal conversation? In other words, with the limited vocabulary and grammar skills a Spanish I student has, how do I get them to speak in Spanish?

**Data Collection and Findings.** The first step in my study was to develop a student survey to see what topics of interest students had. The survey had three questions on it: *What topics would be interesting for you to help draw out conversation in Spanish? What are your goals as far as speaking Spanish is concerned? What is keep-*



ing you from reaching the goals set in question #2? In other words, what can I do to help? Of the 96 surveys distributed I received 60 back. Games, sports, food, music, and movies were the topics of greatest interest. Students most wanted to be able to speak without hesitation, and they felt reaching their goals would be facilitated through games, more “practice,” self-motivation, and hearing the teacher speak more Spanish.

My next step was to design lessons based on students’ interest that would provide an opportunity for conversation in Spanish. One involved a telephone conversation. First, I introduced the new and exciting vocabulary, including slang phrases along with key phrases for answering the telephone and having a conversation in general. I generated the vocabulary list using a slang phrase book and the text book. The grammar needed was the conditional tense and the verbs *tener*, *venir*, *pensar*, *querer*, *preferir* and *empezar* in the present tense. Students had studied these structures and were now to combine them in context. The kids were able to choose their own partner this time, and two full class periods were devoted to the creation of conversations and the editing process. The phone calls were to be for the purpose of issuing and responding to an invitation. Participants could decline and give an excuse or negotiate something else to do, a better time or day, etc. The process could take more than one phone call and could be humorous. Students were encouraged to use their imagination.

***“Actually making the puppets was more work than I had anticipated! It was not that complicated, but many 8<sup>th</sup> graders are not very adept at following directions or using fine motor skills.”***

The weekend was left to practice so that they could respond naturally to their partner in the conversations. On Monday, ten minutes were allotted as additional practice time. I provided the cell phones, and the conversations were excellent. I have never before had 100% of the students prepared and anxious to volunteer to share. A post-activity survey showed students had fun, felt they were able to use the vocabulary, and that the conversation was more helpful than a test.

The second attempt at “conversation” was through a puppet show. I felt using a different format would encourage a different type of creativity and help the few shyer ones not be so self-conscious in front of the class. Students worked in groups of three to write a short script for a puppet show that they were to practice and present to the class. First, of course, students were to make their own puppets using materials, lace, beads, buttons, etc. Actually making the puppets was more work than I had

anticipated! We were not quite where I wanted to be when parent volunteers I had recruited showed up to help with the sewing. It was not that complicated, but many 8<sup>th</sup> graders are not very adept at following directions or using fine motor skills.

The script students were to write was to focus around their chosen topic of food. They were required to use both the present and preterit tenses, direct and indirect object pronouns, and slang phrases that had been previously introduced. Each character was to speak a minimum of three times, not including things like “Hola!” and “Cómo estás?” Again, they were to practice their scripts so that they could speak naturally. I provided a stage, but they supplied props and a backdrop (scenery).

I was expecting even better performances than before since the topic was something they had suggested. However, fewer students were prepared with their script. A lot of attention was given to the puppets, props, scenery, etc. instead of the speaking roles or well-developed plays. Little time was spent on the academic portion. The kids decided that since they had a cover to hide behind, I would never know if the script was being read or not. However, I had told them prior to the due date that I would be sitting so that I could see them. I guess they just did not believe me. (Imagine that from 8<sup>th</sup> graders!)

I also conducted a post-activity evaluation in which I learned that the kids felt that the puppet show activity was a lot of “fun” but wanted more time to practice their scripts. Doing so outside of school was too difficult. Furthermore, they did not make the same connection as they had done with the phone conversations and, with both scenarios, they mentioned that memorizing was too hard. Apparently, even though I repeatedly ask them how often they walk around school with scripted conversations in their binders so that they can carry on conversations with others (elicited laughter), they still felt the need to memorize word for word.

Finally, I was fortunate to have my principal and assistant principal interview students in several classrooms to see if learners were making the connection that I was hoping for, but few did. The administrators asked questions such as: *Why are you doing this activity? What do you think you are learning? and How will this activity help you feel comfortable using Spanish?* Unfortunately, I did not have administrators come in during the phone conversations, only the puppet shows. In that activity, for the most part, students all thought that they were learning how to sew! There were a few positive responses to the questions, however. As to why they were doing the puppet show, students also said, “to learn how to speak Spanish” and “to help us be creative in our Spanish.” Some felt they were learning “to be more creative with the basics of Spanish” and “learning Spanish words

for food better.” They felt they would be more comfortable using Spanish because they would “know how to order food” and “because you get to have fun making stuff and learning Spanish.”

**Plan of Action.** I do plan on trying to do one more conversation before the end of the year. Next year I will ask my 8<sup>th</sup> graders what topics interest them and try to get in more conversations to their liking beginning in August. As for doing another puppet show, I am not sure just yet how to convince the students that it is important to have a fluid conversation without reading from a script—even if they are behind a table! The puppet show was another avenue to explore and get them comfortable in front of an audience or listening and responding to someone else.

### **Increasing Opportunities for Real Communication** Phyllis Santiago, Killeen ISD

**Purpose of the Study.** I teach Spanish I in a middle school to 8<sup>th</sup> graders who receive one high school credit for foreign language. I sought to investigate students’ interest level throughout a thematic unit of their choice with a focus on communicative use of the target language. My belief is that when students have a part in the planning and designing of lessons that are meaningful to them, they will seek opportunities to use and increase their newly acquired vocabulary and become life-long learners. I wanted to compare students’ communication in the target language under these conditions with the communication that regularly takes place using the standard lesson from the textbook.

The question is important to me because most students learning a foreign language are interested in communication. Usually the foreign language classroom provides the time for students to practice the target language, but in a controlled way, within the limited parameters provided by the textbook. Based on my observations in my classes, the end-result of these lessons is somewhat mechanical, even when we try to personalize the situations. At the end of the year, I want my students to leave with the feeling that they learned something that they will use. I do not want this Spanish class to be just another graduation requirement.

**Research Question.** The question I sought to investigate was the following: Will student choice of thematic unit topic increase oral communication in the target language?

**Data Collection and Analysis.** I designed a new unit with input from students and used videotapes and a survey to gather information for my project. I also kept a journal where I recorded my observations of students’

behavior and attitudes. For this project, I chose one class and told those students that I wanted to try a different approach with the next unit. We discussed some ideas about learning a foreign language and why it is important, and they all concurred that communicating orally in the target language is important to them. Next, we discussed topics that might be of interest to them. I asked students to vote on one topic. Out of 21 students, 19 chose food and two picked television. I also told them that at the end of the unit, they would complete a survey comparing the new food unit with the one we were currently working on.

At that time, we were completing a textbook unit on physical descriptions and personality traits which had been conducted in the customary manner: presentations of grammar and vocabulary, lots of oral drills and structured written workbook exercises. I decided to finish the unit by videotaping the students role-playing a situation in which they would apply the vocabulary and grammar from the lesson: describing a blind date. Students worked in pairs to write a dialogue and, after two days of preparation, they presented their role-play to the class.

We started working on the vocabulary for our trial food unit the following week. Students developed lists of words they were interested in learning, and together we decided on the words we would use. In the interest of time, I provided the students with the translations and pronunciation for the words that they chose. For example, students wanted to learn the names and placement of dinnerware, so they researched the information, discussed the results with me, and created their own placemats containing drawings of dinnerware placement with the item names in Spanish. We also learned to talk about likes and dislikes using *gustar* and *encantar*, preceded by *me*, *te*, *le*, *nos*, *les*. The class wanted to learn how to order food in a restaurant because they felt that knowledge would be useful in the community (where there is a high population of native speakers of Spanish), so we learned to use the verb *querer*. However, the grammar was presented only as it was useful for the specific purposes of ordering and stating likes and dislike. I did not present complete verb paradigms, and we did not spend a lot of time drilling the forms. We agreed that at the end of the unit, students could bring in food and recreate a restaurant scenario.

The prospect of eating in the classroom gave the students something to look forward to. One student worked on a menu based on the food items students would be bringing to school. The class voted on a name for the restaurant, and another student created a sign for it. The rest divided in groups and created different signs for the restaurant showing food groups or planned decorations for the restaurant. I videotaped students working on some of the activities to document their attitudes and enthusi-

asm in their learning and observed them using the Spanish vocabulary words we had learned in the lesson. For our end of unit assessment, I told students I would videotape the restaurant scenario and would walk around to listen to their conversations (ordering food, liking/not liking the food, etc.) They were already comfortable with the videotaping since I had been recording off and on to get them used to it.

*“At the end of the year, I want my students to leave with the feeling that they learned something that they will use. I do not want this Spanish class to be just another graduation requirement.”*

Following “food day,” students completed a survey (some Likert and some yes/no responses) comparing their feeling about the two units they had just completed. They responded to questions about the helpfulness of the vocabulary and grammar provided in the textbook or by the teacher, whether or not they felt they had sufficient time to practice and learn the materials, and how helpful the structures and vocabulary were for their final role-plays. Students had slightly more favorable responses for the food unit regarding the vocabulary (72% compared with 61% for the textbook lesson), but more favorable responses for the textbook lesson regarding the grammar than for the food unit (72% to 39%). When asked specifically about their understanding of the grammatical structures, students clearly did not feel they understood them as well for the food unit, not a surprising finding considering the amount of time devoted to structured practice in the textbook as compared to the less structured discussion of verbs in the food unit. However, when asked which lesson they enjoyed more, students overwhelmingly chose the food unit (15 of 18 students with two non-responses). Overall, 12 students thought the unit on food was more useful, four students answered that the unit on descriptions was more useful, and two students answered that the two lessons would be equally useful.

Based on my observations in the classroom, the study of the videotape, and the responses from the survey, I believe the students enjoyed the unit on food and being part of the decision-making process more than the unit from the textbook on physical descriptions and personality traits. Most students were engaged in the activities in the food unit and stayed on task, and some students took special interest in creating special projects that their classmates could use during some of the activities. During the unit from the textbook, students worked in a more mechanical manner. For example, the videotape of the “blind date” role-play situation shows students reading their dialogues from their papers. In fact, at the end of the unit, some students indicated that for them, the role-

play was just “doing something to get a grade.” However, they did appear to better understand the grammar structures for the unit on physical descriptions/personality traits than for the food unit as evidenced by the greater degree of accuracy in their role-plays. Again, more time had been spent on grammar in the textbook unit, and students read their dialogues rather than doing them spontaneously as with the restaurant scenario.

Difficulties that surfaced during the food unit included the distraction created by fact that there was food in the classroom. Students simply wanted to sit, visit, and eat. I, on the other hand, was busy making sure that students were participating and listening to their exchange of vocabulary. However, it was difficult, if not impossible, to be observing everything at once. I had asked students to self-rate their use of the vocabulary words and verbs and was disappointed with the results. Students did not indicate that they used these words as much as I had hoped. I believe that taking away the food element might improve students’ performances.

**Plan of Action.** I hope to compare the results of this study with a textbook unit on food that the students will be covering at the end of the year in which they will not be bringing food to class. I also plan to continue allowing students input into the topic of our lessons and providing them more opportunities to engage in activities that focus on real-world use of Spanish. However, because some of my students will be working towards distinguished diplomas or an International Baccalaureate, I want to be sure that they are comfortable with the grammar while not neglecting the hands-on tasks and functional use of the structures.

### **Choosing and Using Meaningful, Communicative Activities Leah Sequeira, Spring Branch ISD**

**Purpose of the Study.** I want my students to communicate with one another in the target language in spoken and written formats that mean something to them and are interesting to them. I want them to learn French, not just memorize it. I want them to learn the process, not just the parts. I want them to be involved in the language, seeing the “big picture.” Therefore, I wanted to identify a process for choosing and using meaningful, communicative activities because without meaning and context, the language is many parts that do not necessarily equal the whole. With meaning, the students can function and create and understand. I am wasting my time if they are not experiencing the language in context.

An opportunity to take a Spanish III course at the University of Houston’s Accelerated Learning Program provided me the inspiration to modify my current teaching

practice. In my Spanish course, we worked hard, spoke and wrote Spanish a *lot*, used our creativity, and did not have tests or quizzes. I wanted to incorporate some of the ideas from that class into making meaningful communication happen in my French classes. Rather than my current routine of deductive presentation of structures and vocabulary and mostly structured practice from the textbook accompanied by frequent tests and quizzes, I decided to focus on developing a new process, including more time spent providing students opportunities for creative use of French.

**Research Questions.** What activities am I currently using that are producing meaningful communication? What new activities can I create that will produce meaningful communication on a daily basis? How would my students feel about experimenting with a new style of class?

*“I observed that, from an instructional point of view, structures that in past years took days to make clear were now being used creatively by students within a single class period because the tasks were personalized and specific.”*

**Data Collection and Findings.** To conduct my research project, I did an analysis of my lesson plans, developed new activities that I hoped would generate more meaningful communication, and surveyed students to find out their reactions to the innovation. I also kept a journal of my observations on how students seemed to participate in class. By “meaningful communication,” I am referring to use of the target language in tasks that are interesting to students, in which they are actively engaged and using the language to express their *own* meaning.

To begin the analysis, I looked through the last two months of my lesson plans and made an outline of the types of activities that I had been using. I identified which parts of the lesson were most valuable to the learning process by reflecting on the activities in which students had seemed to be most engaged. I decided to continue beginning each class with activities reviewing the previous day’s lesson, checking for comprehension and reinforcing learning. For example, we continue to check homework, answer questions in French that tie to the previous day’s material, and translate two sentences (also tied to those materials) to reinforce difficult structures. They use their notes from the day before to help them complete the questions and translations. I believe these activities are meaningful to students because, as I observe them, they are on task, asking questions, and striving to get the right answer. Their ability to communicate successfully and the amount of interaction in French

among students that I have observed shows me that these activities are meaningful and useful to them.

Immediately following the review, I now reinforce the previous day’s learning with a communicative activity (see examples below). I have eliminated drills and mechanical textbook activities in class (structured workbook practice is done as homework) and have developed tasks that are more open-ended and allow for creative use of language. I provide the structure for the activity, but students come up with the content within those parameters. With the open-ended tasks, students do not “finish”—rather they continue to work, creating with the language until I call time. Now, rather than introducing new material with a grammatical explanation followed by structured practice, I have developed a process to teach new structures or vocabulary in context through story-telling and comprehension checks. For example, I introduced a past tense by telling students a story in French about something that had happened to me. I checked that they were understanding by asking them questions about the story as I went along. Their verbal responses to the questions showed they understood. I also now introduce structures in a simplified context and do not introduce everything at once. For example, I initially presented only third-person object pronouns rather than all of them.

Following the introduction to new materials, students work in groups on a task-based assignment in which they must use French and the structures or vocabulary in context to complete and present a “product” to the class. These tasks are open-ended and allow for creativity. In one group assignment, for example, following my contextualized introduction to possessive adjectives, Level I students were given a piece of butcher paper on which they drew a house that belonged to two famous people. They then presented their drawing to the class, telling us in French what was in the house: “This is their cat,” “Here is their chair,” “This is his car,” etc. I observed many students rushing to use dictionaries to look up new words to create their own meaning—something I had not observed before. The language was spontaneous and often humorous. From watching the students who were listening, it was clear they also were enjoying and understanding their classmates and that the new vocabulary was being reinforced.

Another activity enjoyed by Level II students was working in pairs to write a dialogue on a transparency incorporating object pronouns. They introduced a topic and then continued the dialogue, replacing the noun with pronouns in the rest of the conversation. For example, students might begin with, “Oh, I like your watch! Where did you get it?” “I got it at the Gap,” and so forth. Then, with the transparencies on the overhead, students read the dialogue and pointed out corrections that needed to be made. Many students worked hard to make their con-

versations unique, and student surveys indicated that students found these two activities most interesting because they were able to be creative with the language and enjoyed the conversations of their peers. In my journal, I observed that, from an instructional point of view, structures that in past years took days to make clear were now being used creatively by students within a single class period because the tasks were personalized and specific.

At the end of a month, I gave the students a survey containing questions about the new class format. They commented that they enjoyed it and also felt that the class time flowed better. They understood the purpose of the review at the beginning of the period, the new strategy for presenting material, and the purpose of the more communicative, creative practice. It was a simple format that they could readily follow.

In my journal, I noted that students were experimenting more with the language. Their written and spoken French brought in new vocabulary that they found in the dictionary, vocabulary from previous lesson that they incorporated, and many idioms that I had helped them with. For the first time, students were reaching for the dictionaries because they had new things they *wanted* to say. Because they had a need to know, they ended up learning much more vocabulary than would have been introduced otherwise. As I observed their presentations and evaluated their use of the new structures and vocabulary in dialogues, I also found that they were grasping the ideas and language faster than previously. In their surveys, the students commented that they felt like they were really learning because they could hear themselves communicating well in the language.

**Plan of Action.** I enjoy this new, simplified way of teaching: reviewing material, presenting new material, and watching students produce language in a meaningful way through contextualized, task-based activities. A colleague once told me that language is to be discovered and that discovery happens when language is presented in meaningful contexts—an idea that has driven this project... and me! This summer, I will be reviewing what is taught at each level of French. I plan to create a way to present the material in a context that is relevant to students and reflects their interests. I will use story-telling, question/answer, and games. I will also develop templates for eight types of activities resulting in a “product” (such as the butcher paper drawing or transparency dialogues) and that will engage students and provide them an opportunity to use the target language to express real meaning.

## Improving the Communication Skills of Spanish IV-V AP Students Miriam Thompson, Round Rock ISD

**Purpose of the Study.** This is my third year teaching Spanish IV-V Advanced Placement (AP). In looking over my students' AP scores the last two years, I noticed that they did not score well on the oral portion of the exam. The purpose of my study was to investigate activities that create interpersonal communication. My goal was to provide a 10-15 minute oral activity every class period.

**Research Questions.** Questions I considered while incorporating these activities were the following:

- Am I involving students in tasks that create interpersonal communication?
- Do these students perceive these tasks as helpful in creating interpersonal communication?
- Are these tasks improving their interpersonal communication skills?

**Data Collection and Findings.** I collected data for my study in several ways: student surveys of each type of oral activity, student self-evaluations of improvement based on two sample recordings, and a videotape of two students engaged in a practice activity. I began by asking students to evaluate activities performed in class on a scale of 1-4, with 1 being *not very helpful* and 4 being *very helpful*. The survey also asked them to indicate what was helpful about the activity and what was difficult about it. I surveyed the students each time I presented a different type of activity. Based on their responses, I repeated some activities and threw out others that were not very helpful.

One comment that kept coming up was the need for vocabulary to talk about the topic, so I began to modify the way the students actually did the activity. For example, one of the activities I had my students practice is an AP exercise. Students received a set of six pictures. I gave them two minutes to study the pictures and take notes and two minutes to tell their partner a story about the pictures. A variation of the same activity was to have the students tell the story together. One student would say something about a picture, and his/her partner would continue the story as they moved through the set of pictures. The students indicated on their surveys that they did not feel that they had enough vocabulary to tell the story, so we began to brainstorm vocabulary together as a class before the activity began. I surveyed the students again after I modified the activity, and they thought the story-telling was smoother. Students would also ask how to say things *after* they told the story as they had thought of a word they needed to know.

Another AP exercise that we did in class was the Direct Response Questions. I would ask students questions,

and they had 20 seconds to tell their partner the answer. The students were asked to describe something, give an opinion, convince someone to do something, or say what they would do in a hypothetical situation. Sometimes I used AP questions. Sometimes I used this format to review a story we had read, to reinforce a grammar concept we were learning, to talk about a video selection we had viewed, or to review vocabulary. When we did AP-type exercises, I also had students give each other feedback using the AP rubrics.

I tried to be creative with the pictures I had, and so I came up with the idea of having a student draw a picture while his/her partner described it. In another activity, some students had the same picture and some students had a different picture. I gave them two minutes to discuss their pictures with their partner and then determine if their pictures were identical or not. The students indicated on their surveys that this activity was fun and helped them focus on vocabulary.

After 4-5 weeks of doing these activities, I videotaped a couple of students telling a story together using the six pictures. While I videotaped, I noticed that they had not brainstormed and talked about the vocabulary first and that they were having trouble telling the story. I stopped the class and we repeated the instructions. The second time around, students took the time to talk about the vocabulary and discuss things they could say about the pictures, and the story flowed without a lot of hesitation. This was very helpful to me as a teacher because activities that I had intended to be communicative I saw on the video were really not. Although I had meant for this to be an interpersonal activity, I found out that the students were not asking questions and clarifying as I had hoped they would do. Videotaping the students gave me a better idea of how they were actually communicating and how I could help them improve.

I also interviewed the two students I had videotaped. They agreed that the second time they told the story *after* they had brainstormed ideas and vocabulary was much better. Their speech was not as hesitant, and they had good ideas. They were able to point out areas where they had improved as well as areas where they felt like they needed more practice. In the past while practicing for the AP exam, my students have used their two minutes of preparation time to furiously write as much as they could. Of course when they started telling the story, they ran out of things to say in about 30 seconds as they had already read what they had written in their two minutes of planning. My students are now convinced that writing down vocabulary and phrases that they want to incorporate in their story is much more useful than attempting to write a story in two minutes. As I walk around and monitor my students when they do this AP activity, they are no longer writing a story but brainstorming ideas

during this 2-minute preparation time. Their stories are also much better and more fluent.

When I began my study in September, I had set up tape recorders and had my students tape an AP oral practice. I had them tape themselves again in November and compare the two tapes. On a scale of 1 (*no improvement*) to 4 (*drastic improvement*), sixteen students gave themselves a 2 and nine students gave themselves a 3. I was surprised that they did not give themselves a higher score. I had thought for sure that every student would see that they had improved drastically with all the practice we had done in class. As I read the comments, I noticed that the students who had given themselves a 2 were still very concerned about their vocabulary. Some of their comments regarding improvement were these ideas:

- “actually saying something that made sense and not very long pauses”
- “once I get going, it is better, maybe the vocabulary is better”
- “vocabulary, meeting time limit, finishing the picture sequence”
- “made more sense and there was a bit more detail”
- “using more advanced vocabulary”

However, areas where they felt like they needed more practice were the following:

- “understand questions because sometimes there is a word that I don’t know and it’ll change the whole meaning when I answer the question”
- “elaborating more, so that I will take up the time”
- “normal vocabulary”
- “thinking of enough things to say without repeating myself”

Students who gave themselves a 3 commented that not only their vocabulary had improved but also their grammar. Some of their comments were these:

- “I can think faster about the pictures and questions and get more into the story.”
- “There is less dead air, I correct more mistakes, more variety in grammar.”
- “different vocabulary”
- “organization of thought”
- “less long pauses, actually finished the story”

Even though some of these students were still concerned about vocabulary, most of their comments were focused on grammar.

- “I don’t conjugate the verbs fast enough.”

- “vocabulary and verb tenses”
- “using the more advanced verb tenses, like future and subjunctive”
- “conjugating verbs”
- “I still make grammatical tense mistakes, pronoun errors.”

**Plan of Action.** Being able to involve my students in this study has given them a sense that, as a teacher, I am concerned about their learning and am striving to match my teaching with their needs. It has helped me to really focus on an area where I felt that I needed to improve for the benefit of my students. Next year, I plan to continue with the oral communicative practice but would like to research ways to help my students learn and retain vocabulary. This subject has come up numerous times in class and on their surveys. I will also stress the importance of students using their 2-minute preparation time wisely, and I would like to videotape students more often so that I have time to review and see what is “really going on” in pair work, something that is difficult to do in the course of the class period.

### **Inclusion in the LOTE Classroom** **María Treviño, Texas Education Agency**

**Purpose of the Study.** In my first years teaching Spanish, I remember receiving a list from the counselors of students who were considered “slow learners” and being told that they needed more time to do their work. There was no special training for teachers and no meeting between all parties to discuss the students’ educational plans. Teachers would read the lists, make a notation to provide additional assistance, and move forward.

In my second year of teaching, I had a student who required more attention, more time for daily work and tests, more explanation—just more of everything. Besides regular classroom instruction, she routinely came to my classroom before or after school for additional help. We reviewed orally and in writing and used as many hands-on activities as possible. She really tried very hard, but was more than a little stressed to be successful in her classes because her mother wanted her to be a doctor. Finally, one day she put her hands on her head in desperation and said to me, “Sra. Treviño, are you sure you know how to teach Spanish?” At first I was speechless, and finally I said to her: “Yes, hijita,\* I know how to teach Spanish. I just need to find a way to teach *you*.” She finally passed with a C+ and was so proud of it, as I was proud of her. From that very moment, I began to work with the administration and counselors to change the

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\**my little daughter*, a term of endearment used frequently with non-relatives considered close

district rule regarding students enrolling in languages. Languages were not just for students with a B in English and who were college bound. *All* students could be successful if given the right opportunities in the classroom!

Thirty years later, there are even more students enrolling in languages. Most classes are heterogeneous with gifted and talented, average, and special needs students all mixed in the same class, and teachers are trying to accommodate all students so that they can be successful. Yet somehow the training to meet the needs of “special needs” students has not been available, especially for teachers of *Languages Other Than English (LOTE)*. The question of how to address inclusion in the LOTE classroom remains unanswered.

The purpose of my study was to take a closer look at the population of students who are enrolling in LOTE classes and how teachers are dealing with modifications and accommodations to help all students succeed in learning a second language. This subject is of extreme importance to me; first, because of the personal experience that I just related (and those that followed in subsequent years), and second, because I see an ever-increasing enrollment of special needs students in foreign languages. As the former Instructional Specialist for International Languages in Northside Independent School District in San Antonio, Texas, I received requests from teachers to provide assistance in meeting the needs of these students. Frustration was evident in the classroom, and curriculum guides needed to be changed to reflect modifications. Staff development in special education was a priority as most LOTE teachers did not have a special education background. The staff development presented, however, was generic to all disciplines. Because most special education specialists are *not* LOTE teachers, they cannot provide much assistance specific to language instruction for special needs students.

Beginning with the 2004-2005 school year, Texas Education Code 28.025 mandates that incoming freshmen students complete the Recommended Program, which requires two years of a foreign language. Many school districts have already implemented this requirement in preparation for this law. There will be more special needs students in the LOTE classroom, and teachers will have to be prepared to develop and carry out the students’ *Individualized Education Program (IEP)* to provide appropriate learning experiences.

**Research Questions.** The three main questions that I wanted answered in this action research study were:

- *What are some of the most common learning disabilities seen in students enrolled in LOTE?*
- *What are the modifications that teachers are using to meet the students’ needs?*

- *What are the most appropriate accommodations to make the learning experience successful for the student?*

**Data Collection and Findings.** In order to obtain basic information from the teaching field, I developed a survey asking teachers a variety of questions including number of years teaching experience, the number of IEPs they deal with on a daily basis, their involvement in *Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD)* committees, etc. The other items focused on my three research questions mentioned above. The survey was published in the *Languages Other Than English Center for Educator Development* newsletter and in the *Texas Foreign Language Association* newsletter. I received 148 survey responses by the given deadline, and these were reviewed for basic information.

The 148 responses included teachers of Spanish, French, German, Latin, Japanese, and Chinese. Experience ranged from those in their first year of teaching to those with 25 years in the classroom. Initial information suggests that 62 teachers had received some staff development related to special needs students in the LOTE classroom; however, the length or depth of the staff development was not included. A surprising revelation was that a large number of teachers had IEPs for students for whom they had not participated in the ARD. This is a crucial factor since the teacher is ultimately responsible for the success of the student. I believe that the teacher should have input into what the IEP outlines for the student in order for the learner to be successful in the LOTE classroom. Obviously, in order for the teacher to provide meaningful input into the IEP, the teacher needs special training in recognizing appropriate accommodations and modifications for different special needs.

There was a tremendous range of disabilities mentioned, from hearing, visual, and speech impairments to a variety of disorders and syndromes. One shocking finding was that a couple of teachers listed “English as a Second Language (ESL)” as a disability. What was also evident from the data was that teachers are still confused as to what is a *modification* (change in content) and what is an *accommodation* (change in teaching strategy, environment, etc.). As teachers listed their modifications and accommodations on the survey, the same activities were often listed under both categories. In fact, it should be noted that these terms are not used consistently throughout the state or in the nation. It appears that some teachers are still not aware of their legal responsibilities regarding special needs students. Teachers also expressed frustration at their lack of training: “I don’t know the difference between a modification and an accommodation.” “Large class size hinders special help for any student.” “I often am at a loss. I do not understand what is expected of me for these students. Help me under-

stand!” “I hear teachers saying such things as ‘but this is a foreign language. If the student can’t perform, he shouldn’t be here.’ We need to know what our legal responsibilities are, and how to fulfill them.”

**Plan of Action.** It is clear that teachers are trying to do their job, but there needs to be support at the district level with curriculum/staff development and plenty of cooperation between the Special Education Department and LOTE teachers. At the state level, several initiatives can be implemented in collaboration with school districts, LOTE district coordinators, and LOTE teachers.

It is my desire to be able to establish specific special education training for LOTE teachers so that they can be successful in helping special needs students acquire a second language to the best of their ability. The first step was to collect the preliminary information reported above. The next step was initiated at the Texas Conference on Coordinating Languages held in Austin in April 2003 when some initial staff development on inclusion in LOTE was provided to district LOTE coordinators and lead teachers. Next, I would like to do a follow-up with a group of district LOTE coordinators, designated teachers, and special education specialists to develop a handbook of accommodations and modifications for foreign language teachers to use in developing IEPs and to use as they design appropriate lessons for their special needs students. After that, I hope to be able to establish a cadre of LOTE trainers who will be able to deliver staff development in a variety of formats. Finally, I would like to work with regional Education Service Centers so that they can offer this staff development in their service area. These are long-term projects which require funding, but the goal is to have some of them in place by the 2004-2005 school year when Texas Education Code 28.025 authorizes the implementation of the required Recommended Program for graduation.

### **Student Feelings, Authentic Instruction, and the AP Test** **Renée Wooten, Wichita Falls ISD**

**Purpose of the Study.** The purpose of my study was to examine student feelings regarding readiness and comfort level pertaining to taking the AP Spanish Language test. The topic is important to me because I am a new teacher of AP Spanish Language. My personal feelings are that authentic evaluation and instruction is more valuable to students than activities and isolated evaluations performed in the traditional manner. Yet students are in my class to prepare for the AP exam which is largely traditional in format: multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, etc. I know that a goal of an effective teacher is to teach the way one tests. So, with the addition of the AP program,



how would I stay true to my style of teaching while preparing them for the exam?

My students' feelings are very important to me because I want them to have a positive experience learning Spanish that will extend beyond the four walls of the classroom. I hope that I can offer to my students the opportunity to perform well on the exam *and* to feel confident and secure in their ability to use the language. After all, I surmise that a high level of confidence and security with one's knowledge will foster positive feelings regarding the exam and create an environment conducive to success in the class and on the AP Spanish Language test. Yet students say they are overwhelmed at the thought of the exam and do not seem to realize how much they actually know and can do in Spanish.

**Research Questions.** I wanted to know if student feelings about their ability to do well on the AP exam were related to the types of lessons and assessments that were performed in the classroom. Specifically, I wanted to know if students felt that authentic activities that required more than verb conjugation drills and memorization of vocabulary led them to feel comfortable and prepared enough to take the exam. Were students likely to feel more or less prepared to take the AP Spanish Language test after having performed non-traditional activities that require them to show what they can *do* rather than those that simply test their ability to memorize? I also questioned the relationship between the types of assessments that were used in the class and students' feelings of confidence in taking the AP exam. Were students more or less likely to feel prepared and confident with an authentic evaluation tool rather than one that was more traditional, such as multiple choice and fill-in-the-blank?

**Data Collection and Findings.** The study took place over a six-week grading period. First, I reviewed my lesson plan, and I inserted more traditional activities (straight-forward grammar and vocabulary presentations) and assessments (vocabulary quizzes, discrete point tests) to be given in conjunction with those that I considered more authentic, meaning that they would require students to show what they were able to *do* with the language. For example, instead of having students fill in reflexive verb conjugations on a worksheet, I might ask them to "perform" their morning routine as another student narrated the scene or to summarize a folk tale by writing a script for a skit. I alternated the activities that were traditional and required conventional assessment tools with those that allowed the students to demonstrate what they could do with what they know instead of just what they could memorize.

I must admit, the class did seem to respond well to the structure of the traditional lessons. Based on my observations of the class recorded in my research journal, I

noted that "the students are mostly prepared. They even mention that they need to be pushed to study," and "The students are responding to the very structured-style classes we have been having." I wondered if it might reflect a halo effect: "Maybe they are responding to the extra attention."

Since I was not collecting quantitative data, I did not conduct a pre-test at the beginning of the six weeks because I did not want to influence students' answers on the final survey that would be administered at the end of that grading period. When the time came, I gave them a survey with open-ended questions, asking them to comment on those activities and assessments that they liked and that allowed them to feel more prepared and confident to take the AP Spanish Language exam. Because my research was to obtain qualitative information, I read for themes in the answers. I recorded the common responses and found that 72% of students had lacked confidence about taking the AP Spanish Language test prior to this grading period (and 77% did not feel prepared), but at the end of this 6-weeks, 61% now felt *more* confident and *more* prepared about taking it. Overall, students now had a better attitude with regard to taking the exam. Many expressed that although they might not pass the AP test, they were enjoying the experience of preparing for it.

***"Even though they responded well to the traditionally-structured assignments, when surveyed, they overwhelmingly indicated a preference for the more authentic tasks."***

Since survey results had indicated students' lack of confidence when we began the grading period, I thought it would be interesting to see what activities and assessments had improved their confidence. According to the survey, the activities that they felt were most beneficial in preparing them for the AP exam were those that were *not* traditional. The activities and assignments that were most enjoyed by 83% of the students were the authentic ones that required that they produce and present information. Indeed, this type of authentic assignment did seem to provide students with feelings of contentment, confidence, and preparedness. Even though they responded well to the traditionally-structured assignments, when surveyed, they overwhelmingly indicated a preference for the more authentic tasks.

**Plan of Action.** During my review of the surveys, I wondered if they might feel more confident and prepared due to factors that I could not control during the study. For example, I thought that the students might have more positive feelings toward taking the AP exam simply because they had been able to practice for an additional six-week period. So I decided that this was not the type

of study that could be performed exclusively in one grading period. In fact, I think that the inquiry might be more effective if conducted during the entire year.

I also thought that the types of students present in this class might have much to do with their feelings regarding the test. Most of these students are seniors, and those in this particular senior class expect to make the best marks on tests, but they are not overly willing to do the work to make this happen. In other words, they usually feel so confident about their abilities that they refuse to commit extra time and energy to study or do additional work other than what has been required.

I will not complete this study until after the AP exam has been taken in May, at which point I will again survey students about their feelings on taking the AP exam, how prepared they felt, and their confidence about their success on the exam. Although students indicated that they liked the authentic classroom activities best, they also pointed out that the experiment had helped them feel more prepared to take the AP exam. Therefore, I do plan to try this experiment next year with the AP class. Although the lessons might change, the mixing of traditional and non-traditional methods and evaluations will remain constant. Again, I will be curious as to the feelings of my students.

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## Perspectives on the Teachers' Research

Reading across the ten studies above, we discover important themes and areas of professional concern for the Texas LOTE teacher. All the studies maintain an area of focus on *learners* and the relationship of the learner to a particular teaching or assessment practice. In some cases, the learners became co-researchers with the teacher during the action research project and were asked to self-assess, provide input on lesson content and assessments, and rate instructional strategies for their effectiveness. It is noteworthy that, for five out of the ten studies, spontaneous and creative language ability in the interpersonal mode of communication (the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning, 1996) is a particular concern. Other action research studies sought to understand student opinion on lesson design and assessment effectiveness, topics and contexts for presenting new language content, and reactions to instructional innovations, such as thematic units and interdisciplinary instruction. Three studies looked at particular types of learners—the heritage language learner, learners with special needs, and the Advanced Placement student. In the case of the heritage language learner, a frequently-observed situation in the state of Texas, the study attempted to innovate instruction in an effort to integrate more fully the heritage language learner in second-year foreign language classes. The findings of this study point to the critical need for providing differentiated instruction to heritage language learners, a program that will fortunately be implemented in the fall in this teacher's school.

A second theme to emerge across many of the studies was that innovation does not always lead to immediate improvements for all. Rather, a more realistic view is that *innovation is an ongoing process of change and refinement*. In the study of interpersonal communication in the middle school Spanish classroom, the teacher learns that not all activities are created equal. After a close examination of two classroom projects, the teacher discovers that certain projects deflect student attention away from language learning as they focus more on the materials of the project, in this case a puppet show, than they do on using the language. In the study of special needs students, the findings reveal that, despite efforts to educate teachers, among 148 respondents to a survey on special needs LOTE students, teachers often reflected misconceptions about what constitutes a learning disability and confusions about accommodations and modifications. Other studies indicate partial successes and diversity in student opinion about an innovation. For example, in the study of student input into classroom assessment practices, the teacher found that students often reflected traditional views of assessment in their choices, and they did *not* always score higher on student-generated tests. Although some students did not perform substantially lower on student-made assessments and one class performed better, the findings indicate that, for an innovation, “one size does not fit all.”

## Action Plans and Planning for Action

Action research is a reflective cycle of planning for action leading to future action plans that can be carried out and more fully investigated. Far from being completed, these studies represent a teacher's cycle of discovery. This cycle is characterized by the iterative process of assessing conditions in the present for creating and implementing instructional innovations and additional research in the future. All the studies conclude with recommendations for the future and all recommendations involve more action research-based instructional decision-making. Some studies recommend a specific focus on a problem area, such as redesigning communicative activities to allow greater focus on language, vocabulary retention, or topics of student interest. Other studies conclude with large-scale projects.

For example, designing a curriculum specifically for heritage language learners or instituting professional development sessions based on teacher conceptions and misconceptions about the nature of the special needs learner. Finally, some studies refer specifically to the need for collecting more information from students to establish a clearer perspective on student content learning and curriculum. It is clear that planning an action research project has become the catalyst for these teachers to use this new tool in their daily practice and to invoke a research perspective to innovate and improve their instructional planning, teaching approaches, and assessments.

It is hoped that these studies have enlightened and inspired other LOTE teachers to explore this powerful tool of professional development. For all the teachers in this action research institute, I am sure they leave the project with a greater understanding of student learning, language teaching, and the issues that face our profession. Action research is not an additional burden to what we do as teachers. It is fundamental and at the core of accomplished teaching. As one of my own students pointed out to me this past year when she began her action research project for her MAT degree, action research is what teachers should always do, since it is fundamentally “reflective practice.” Action research goes far beyond the “what-to-do-on-Monday-morning” approach to professional development. It is continual, reflective, and renewing and, as such, represents perhaps our best effort at connecting teachers to their practice and building understandings that cannot be captured in methodology textbooks or other generic educational recommendations. As one teacher stated, participation in the action research institute provided a supportive network of teachers that allowed her to explore her own issues and experience the true meaning of teacher empowerment. In her own words “I left feeling inspired, hopeful, and affirmed.”

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