Research to Proficiency:

The Curriculum Design of Middlebury Interactive Languages' High School Fluency Courses

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A Research Driven Approach to Middlebury Interactive Languages' Curriculum Design

I. Key Concepts for the Design of the Fluency* Courses

Research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and cognitive psychology has shown in the last decades that in order to be successful in their foreign language (FL) learning, students need, through exposure to authentic, comprehensible input, rich and frequent opportunities to interact in the target language in a purposeful way.

> *"Conversational interaction is an essential, if not sufficient, condition for second language acquisition. […] what learners need is not necessarily simplification of the linguistic forms but rather an opportunity to interact with other speakers, working together to reach mutual comprehension. Through these interactions, interlocutors figure out what they need to do to keep the conversation going and make the input comprehensible. […] And when communication is difficult, interlocutors must 'negotiate for meaning', and this negotiation is seen as the opportunity for language development." (Lightbown & Spada, 2006:43)*

Five key concepts, identified by Lourdes Ortega (2009) as the five environmental ingredients of success, are at the core of the Fluency* pedagogical design (see figure 1):

1. A positive attitude towards the language and the community speaking this language (*acculturated attitudes*)

2. Frequent exposure to language that is both comprehensible and one step beyond the level of language already acquired (*comprehensible input*)

3. Opportunities to negotiate for meaning, using feedback such as clarification requests, confirmation checks, comprehension checks, etc. (*negotiated interactions*)

4. Opportunities to produce language in meaningful interactions (*pushed output*)

5. Opportunities to engage in noticing relevant linguistic forms in oral and written discourse (*noticing/attention*)
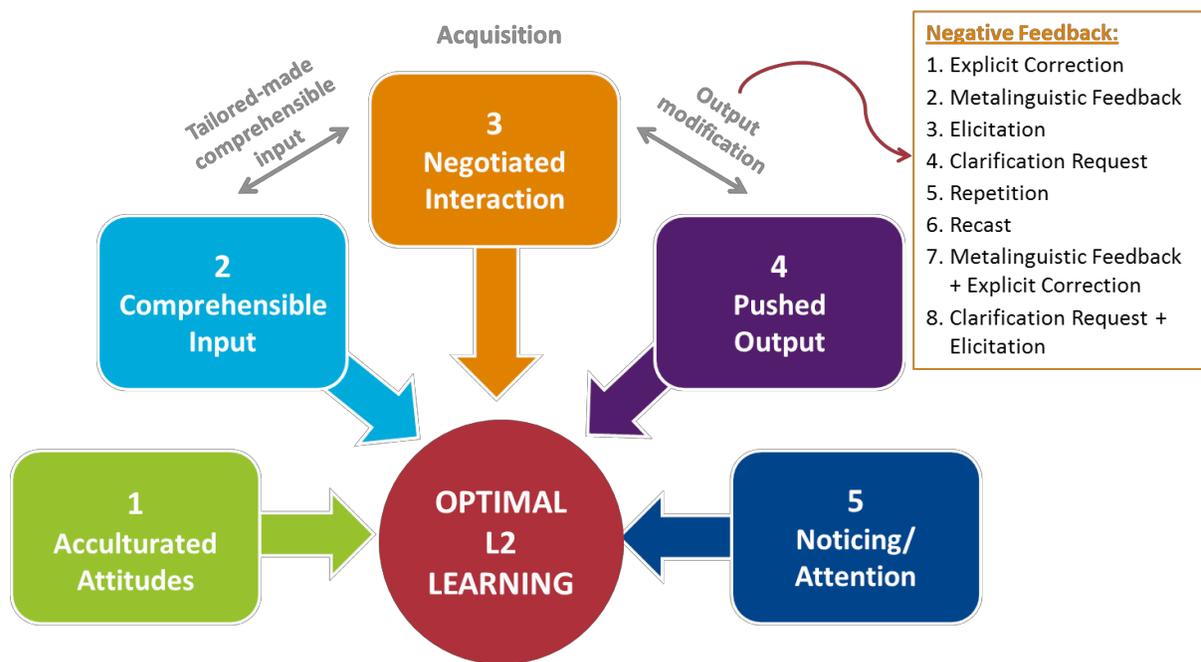
Figure 1: Five key concepts to optimize Second Language Learning (Adapted from Ortega, 2009)

1. Acculturated Attitudes

The diversity of the many characters that interact in the courses' authentic videos, their ages, occupations and locations throughout the world, all contribute to give the students a diverse, vibrant and realistic feel for the target language and culture; reaching far beyond stereotypes, this richness and depth of perspective help students build a positive attitude towards the language and the communities speaking this language.

2. Exposure to Comprehensible Input

SLA and classroom research confirm that being exposed to rich and frequent foreign comprehensible input, even without direct instruction, is an essential component for successful foreign-language acquisition. The exposure of students to authentic documents (texts, audio, videos, images) in the target language is thus a cornerstone in the Fluency* courses. By authentic we mean documents that would fit the following characteristics:

- Document created with no purpose of language learning in mind
- Material not purposefully graded for a specific level of language proficiency
- Material not purposefully scripted
- Material which contains passages that go beyond what FL learner can produce
- Material with large proportion of unknown and non-predictable language
- Material with people speaking naturally
- Material with no non-native listener or reader in mind

"Exposing a listener only to graded material is like feeding a child exclusively on baby food and then wondering why the child cannot cope with an adult diet. [...] It is essential that a listener is given practice in handling recorded material which contains passages that go beyond what s/he is capable of producing as a speaker, and that s/he learns either to ignore these passages or to devise ways of inferring their meaning from the wider context." (Field, 2008:271)

The use of such materials has proven to be valuable at every level of language instruction, given that the task or the activity to be performed by the students is different for beginners, intermediate or advanced learners. Furthermore, the criteria used for the selection of relevant authentic audio/video materials take into consideration the level of the students. Below are three complementary sets of criteria that have guided us in the selection of such documents. It is important to note that these criteria recognize the fact that (contrary to general assumptions and in keeping with the literature) linguistic simplification is not the answer:

From the simpler ….	…. to the more complex
Low level of complexity in the 'reading' of the video *Presence* on the screen of the topic being discussed *Dialogued scenes* - Use of *familiar narrative and cultural structures* - Use of *universal stereotypes* *Moderate use of local socio- cultural humor*	*High level of complexity* in the 'reading' of the video *Evocation* of the topic being discussed *Commented scenes* - Use of *unfamiliar and unpredictable narrative and cultural structures* *Use of cultural specific schemata* *Excessive use of specific socio- cultural references in the target language*

Set 1. Adapted from Compte, 1993

Each item is considered on a scale going from simple to highly complex.

- *Redundancy* between the image and the audio track (the audio track repeats the information presented visually, i.e. dialogued scenes)

- *Complementarities* (the audio track adds to the image, or inversely the image adds to the audio track, i.e. the weather report delivered by a journalist using maps and graphs)

- *Domination* (i.e. domination of audio-track over image in the evening news with the journalist in a TV studio speaking about a news items with no image to illustrate his topic)

- *Autonomy* (the image and the audio tracks have no direct link)

- *Contradiction* (the image is contrary to the audio-track or vice versa)

Set 2. Adapted from Lancien (1986)

Focusing on lower-level skills (decoding)	Focusing on higher-level skills (building meaning)
- *Speech rate: slow careful→ rapid, relaxed* - *Adjustment to speaker → one familiar speaker to many unknown* - *Variety: one familiar accent → many accents, potentially unknown* - *Speaker fluency: fluent and planned→ dysfluent and spontaneous*	- *Number of different ideas present in the clip, from small to excessive amount.* - *Level of complexity of ideas, from low to high* - *Level of familiarity with the topic, from very familiar to totally new* - *The specifics of the task the learner has to perform (i.e. from simple note-taking to contrasting information heard from several speakers)*

Set 3. Adapted from Field, 2008

3. Negotiated Interaction

When interacting in the target language, students create comprehensible input by modifying and adjusting it; meaning is negotiated using clarification requests, confirmation checks and comprehension checks. Therefore, negotiated interaction creates just-in-time learning at the right point of need (Ortega, 2009). In fact, a number of studies have shown that "*the more interlocutors negotiated, the more they comprehended, and that opportunities to negotiate led to better levels of comprehension than providing exposure to either unmodified or pre-modified input*" (Pica et al., 1987; Yano et al., 1994). The project-based approach adopted by the Fluency∗ courses allows for students to interact and negotiate meaning as they work collaboratively on the several Language Quests and projects proposed in each course unit or module.

4. Pushed Output

Although research on comprehension-based approaches for foreign language instruction demonstrates clearly that learners make considerable progress if they have sustained exposure to comprehensible input, Swain's 'comprehensible output hypothesis' (1985) shows that learners have also to produce language in order to process language deeply.

> "*Producing the target language may be the trigger that forces the learner to pay attention to the means of expression needed in order to successfully convey the intended meaning.*" (Swain 1985: 249)

Pushed to produce meaningful and comprehensible output in an interaction, students begin to see the limitations of their interlanguage and have to find other ways of expressing their meaning to reach mutual comprehension:

> "*What learners need is not necessarily simplification of the linguistic forms but rather an opportunity to interact with other speakers working together to reach mutual comprehension.*" (Lightbown & Spada, 2006:43).

While receiving immediate feedback within the interaction, students have to 'negotiate for meaning', a process seen as the opportunity for language development.

The Fluency∗ courses provide many opportunities for students to engage in activities that are representative of what ACTFL defines as 'interpersonal mode', which is characterized by active negotiation of meaning among individuals to carry out the project-based and task-based activities.

5. Noticing and Attention

A positive attitude towards the language and the community speaking this language, frequent exposure to comprehensible input and opportunities to meaningfully interact, although essential to build an optimal environment for second language learning, are not sufficient for the learning to happen (Schmidt, 1993). The students need also to engage in an active process of noticing

linguistic forms (words, structures, sounds), of identifying gaps and holes as they negotiate forms in their interactions with others, of testing new forms and of reflecting upon them using the feedback received during the interaction.

> *"[W]hereas the content of lessons with a focus on formS, is the forms themselves, a syllabus with a focus on form teaches something else – [...] and overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication".* (Long, 1991:45-46).

What are the implications for language teachers who want to follow this approach? According to Ellis (1994), linguistic structures, in other words, grammar, should be taught the following ways:

- *implicitly* via unconscious automatic abstraction of the structural nature of the material
- *explicitly* through *selective learning*, that is, asking students to look for information, formulate and test hypothesis
- *explicitly via rules*, assimilating rules after explanations

Indeed, research shows that students benefit greatly from form-oriented processing activities, which explicitly direct their attention to form aspects of the input.

In the Fluency* courses, structures, words and sounds are taught both implicitly and explicitly. On the one hand, students have as many opportunities as possible to be exposed to authentic content and they are asked to process this content by forming hypotheses about form aspects in meaning-focused activities   problem solving or project-based activities). In addition, we use numerous *input enhancing* techniques to make forms perceptually *salient* (Wong 2003). Among the different techniques that Wong recommends, we have used the following:

- Input flooding (i.e. input that includes many instances of the forms students need to notice, understand, and practice)
- Highlighting: done by the students in specific activities but also with the use of explicit animated reference cards covering grammatical and pronunciation topics.
- Color-coding: same as highlighting.

The core language activities of the Fluency* courses allow students to develop an explicit knowledge of the target language structures, increasing their language learning efficiency and proficiency.

> *"The overall results of the [literature] provide support for the hypothesis that form-focused instruction and corrective feedback within communicative and content-based second and foreign language programs can help learners improve their knowledge and use of particular grammatical features."* (Lightbown & Spada, 2006:175)

II. Instructional Approach

The Fluency* courses' instructional approach is built on four core research-based teaching and learning strategies

1. Content-Based and Content-Oriented Processing

Content-based instruction, a characteristic of Middlebury Language Schools (http://www.middlebury.edu/ls/) and of all immersion programs, offers many advantages in language learning, such as increasing the amount of time in terms of authentic target language exposure, adding cognitively challenging content, as well as increasing the students' motivation while creating a genuine need of interacting with the material and communicating with others in order to understand the content (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Processing this content while trying to understand the meaning of this input enhances, once again, the learning process. The continuous cultural information, along with the carefully planned activities in the course that allow for linguistic-processing, are consistent with the content-oriented processing approach.

As Stryker and Leaver put it,

> *Experience in foreign language classrooms has convinced us that content-based approaches […] have the potential to enhance students' motivation, to accelerate student's acquisition of language, to broaden cross-cultural knowledge, and to make the language learning experience more enjoyable and fulfilling. Moreover, students who experience a well- organized content-based program are more likely to become autonomous, lifelong learners (1997:5).*

2. Learning and Metacognitive Strategies

We know that students' motivation and engagement increases greatly when they realize that they can understand everyday speech in the target language. The use of authentic material that we advocate in the design and implementation of these courses is consistent with this knowledge. However, we have to help students cope with the difficulty of not understanding everything they are exposed to. Engaging in activities to develop avoidance or repair strategies, as well as achievement strategies such as inferring meaning from contextual and co-textual clues or from prior knowledge, will equip the students with the necessary tools to compensate for deficiencies in their receptive and productive skills. Indeed, numerous foreign language studies tend to show that *strategy training*, linked to *metacognitive training*, has a positive effect on language learning. This type of training raises students' awareness of their individual learning process.

Studies may differ in the way learning strategies are named, organized and/or categorized, but in essence they describe the same processes. Rebecca Oxford

(1990), for instance, makes a distinction between direct and indirect strategies (cf. Table 1), whereas, Field, working on listening strategies, regroups them into four categories (cf. Table 2)

Direct Strategies	Indirect Strategies

I. Memory
    A. Creating mental linkages
    B. Applying images and sounds
    C. Reviewing well
    D. Employing action
 	
II. Cognitive
    A. Practicing
    B. Receiving and sending messages strategies
    C. Analyzing and reasoning
    D. Creating structure for input and output
 	
III. Compensation Strategies
    A. Guessing intelligently
    B. Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing (i.e. circumlocution or paraphrasing)
	I. Metacognitive Strategies
	    A. Centering your learning
	    B. Arranging and planning your learning
	    C. Evaluating your learning
	
	II. Affective Strategies
	    A. Lowering your anxiety
	    B. Encouraging yourself
	    C. Taking your emotional temperature
	
	III. Social Strategies
	    A. Asking questions
	    B. Cooperating with others
	    C. Empathizing with others

Table 1. Adapted from Oxford, 1990

Avoidance Strategies	Repair Strategies
A. Message abandonment B. Generalization C. Message reduction	A. Direct appeal for help B. Indirect appeal for help C. Request for repetition D. Request for clarification E. Request for confirmation F. Circumlocution, paraphrase
Achievement Strategies	**Pro-Active Strategies**
A. Hypothesis formation B. Translation C. Key words D. Prominence E. Reliability F. Approximation G. L1 / L2 analogy H. Similar sounding words	A. Task evaluation B. Rehearsing C. Activating appropriate format D. Anticipating likely issues E. Self-assessing

Table 2. Adapted from John Field, 2008

The integration in the Fluency* courses of reflective tools such as self-diagnostics, self-evaluation checklists and rubrics in numerous activities throughout the courses, as well as the use of My Portfolio[1], promotes such metacognitive training.

3. Task-Based Approach

Contrary to a more traditional way of integrating tasks as follow-up activities, a 'task-based' approach to language teaching puts the 'tasks' at the center of the learning process. A task is an activity with a specific goal and involves communicative language use in the process; it goes beyond the common classroom exercise because a task has a direct connection with the real world, and the kind of discourse that arises from a task is intended to resemble that which occurs naturally in the real world (Ellis, 2000). The defining criteria of a task involve (Skehan, 1998; Ellis, 2000):

1. A primary focus on meaning;
2. Some kind of 'gap';
3. A goal that needs to be worked towards;
4. Real-world processes of language use;
5. Outcome/evaluation.

Tasks do not need to be complex, and this approach fits all levels of instruction from beginners to the more advanced learners. For instance, a simple task such as "Spotting the difference" can elicit real-life types of interaction:

Task Design Features	Description of the Task
1. Goal	To elicit use of preposition of location (*on, on, under*, etc...)
2. Input	Two pictures differing in the location of specific objects
3. Conditions	The information is split
4. Procedures	Planning time allowed; pair work

5. Predicted outcomes:
 	
    a. Process
 	
    b. Product
	a. Description of the location of objects; questions and answers
	
	b. A written list of the differences in the picture

(Adapted from Ellis, 2003)

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[1] The Portfolio is part of the Passport tool

In the Fluency* courses, most of the learning activities are partly or fully task-based and contextualized in a realistic communication situation.

4. Cross-Cultural Perspective

The consistent use of authentic videos and texts in the Fluency* courses underscores the inseparability of language and culture. All language learning activities are embedded in culture and vice versa. In addition, and in accordance with the ACTFL National Standards, Fluency* courses give prominent attention to cultures as well as to cross-cultural understanding by providing numerous activities that allow for

- a) Cultural exploration
- b) Connections with other disciplines
- c) Comparisons both among different cultures that exist within the target language, and with the student's own cultural practices.

III.   Assessment: A Multifaceted Approach

The primary purpose of assessment and evaluation is to improve student learning. Assessment is the process of gathering information from a variety of sources (including assignments, demonstrations, projects, performances, tests, etc.) that accurately reflects how well a student is achieving the curriculum expectations in a given subject. As part of assessment, Fluency* courses provide students with descriptive feedback to guide their efforts towards improvement. Evaluation refers to the process of judging the quality of student work on the basis of established criteria, and assigning a value to represent that quality. Assessment and evaluation are based on the ACTFL proficiency scales.

In order to ensure that assessment and evaluation are valid and reliable, and that they lead to the improvement of student learning, the courses use assessment and evaluation strategies that:

- address both what students learn and how well they learn it;
- are based both on categories of knowledge and skills as well as on achievement;
- are varied in nature;
- are administered over a period of time, and designed to provide opportunities for students to demonstrate the full range of their learning;
- are appropriate for the learning activities used learned in the course, the purposes of instruction, and the needs and experiences of the students;
- are designed to be fair to all students;
- ensure that each student is given clear directions for improvement;
- promote students' ability to assess their own learning and to set specific goals;
- include samples of students' work that provide evidence of their

achievement;

- are communicated clearly to students at the beginning of the course or the school term, and at other appropriate points throughout the course.

Figure 2 visually represents the courses' multifaceted approach to assessment:
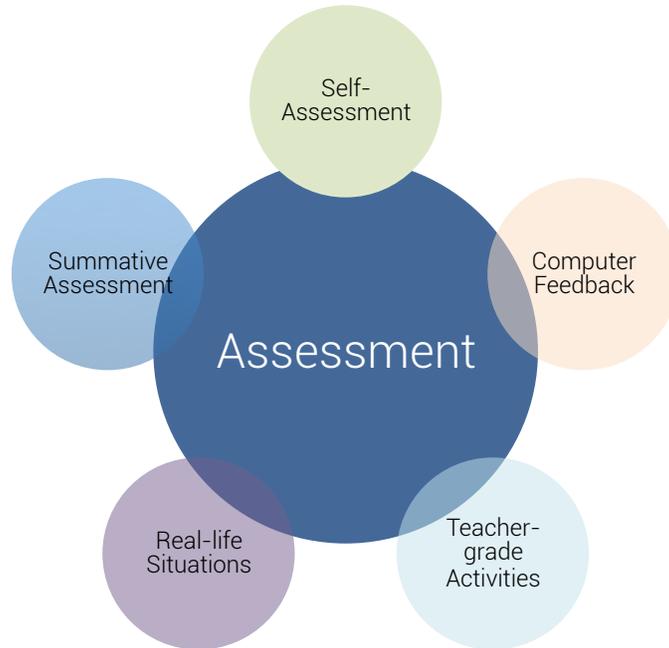

Figure 2: A multifaceted-approach to assessment

The self-assessment takes place through:
   a) self-reflective diagnosis at the beginning and end of each unit or module
   b) self-graded activities using activity specific rubrics

The computer feedback happens in the form of:
   a) right/wrong type of feedback, check marks, etc
   b) activity specific feedback

Teacher graded activities include:
   a) oral assignments
   b) written assignments

Real-life situations will take place
   a) in an online collaborative environment
   b) in the classroom

Summative assessment happens through:
   a) unit tests
   b) midterm and final tests.

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ACTFL National Standards for Foreign Language Learning
http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3392