Goals, Approaches, and Instructional Foci of Middle School Foreign Language Programs in Relation to the Oral Proficiency Movement

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The author suggests through the data revealed in this study regarding foreign language programs and culture education that "programs may be improved through goals that promote interdisciplinary instruction (and) a better definition of the role of culture instruction" she also suggests that, "teacher training institutions and middle school administrators should augment efforts to address these areas."

Prior to the 1990's, few studies had been conducted to determine the characteristics of middle school foreign language programs. Even fewer examined instructional goals and outcomes in any depth, although surface features of middle school foreign language programs and goals had been addressed briefly by Alexander and McEwin in 1988. In 1991, Savignon stated the need to clarify goals in existing foreign language programs in general, noting that "little systematic inquiry has been conducted into foreign language teachers' perceptions and practices" (p. 40). Later, Cellini (1992) provided some description of middle school foreign language programs in Michigan. On the basis of a 1994 study showing that only 37% of district supervisors and 58% of state supervisors identified any exemplary middle school programs, Met (1994) called for further clarification of exploratory programs and for the identification of exemplary programs and practices.

In 1995, because of limited prior research on middle school foreign language programs, a national study was conducted that assessed and compared teacher practices in

middle schools in relation to recommendations of the Oral Proficiency Movement (Stepp, 1996). The Oral Proficiency Movement has provided the impetus for curricular and instructional change within the foreign language profession over the last two decades (Birkbichler & Corl, 1993; Hadley, 1993; Hiple, 1992; LaBouve, 1993; Lipskin-Gasparro, 1995; Omaggio, 1995).

The movement emphasizes real communication as the goal of instruction, recognizing an interrelationship between the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing (Curtain & Pesola, 1988, p. 138). The ideal foreign language curriculum is one that utilizes content-based and task-based instruction (Met, 1988, 1991; Savignon, 1991; Scarcella and Oxford, 1992). In content-based instruction, subject matter from other disciplines is taught in the language. Taskbased instruction requires students to perform real-life tasks using the language. A communicative curriculum also makes use of cooperative learning activities, and presents the four language skills in an integrated manner (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992).

Meaning is given primary emphasis in the curriculum, rather than grammar (form), and form and meaning are integrated (Curtain & Pesola, 1988; Garret, 1991; Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Met, 1988; Nerenz, 1990; Savignon, 1991). Meaning is enhanced and created through the use of varieties of contexts and materials (Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Met, 1988). The teaching of culture is highly valued, since the study of culture provides the context for meaning, and also must be integrated into the unit of study. (Met, 1988; Nerenz, 1990).

As part of the 1995 study comparing teacher practices, data were collected that provided a description of middle school foreign language programs. The purpose of this article is to present the descriptive data concerning goals, approaches, and instructional foci.

The Study

Data were collected through a questionnaire sent to 300 of the nation's middle schools. These schools were chosen at random from 600 schools that had been identified for a previous study (George & Oldaker, 1985). Because it was not known how many of these schools had foreign language programs, or how

many teachers taught in those programs, the surveys were addressed to administrators. These administrators were invited to ask all foreign language teachers within their school to complete a questionnaire. Supporting documents such as goal statements, program descriptions, and program philosophies were requested as well.

Teachers participating in the study also completed the National Association of District Supervisors of Foreign Language (NADSFL) checklist of effective foreign language teacher behaviors, indicating frequency of these behaviors. Another stage of the study gathered interview data from teachers who had been identified by the NADSFL checklist as either communicative or noncommunicative in their methodology. This data is not reported here; however, the interpretation of the descriptive data was at times enhanced by the other data in the study.

In all, 291 surveys were returned from individual teachers in 203 schools. A total of 146 schools, or 72% of the responding schools, reported an existing foreign language program. In these 146 schools, 234 teachers completed the survey. Supporting document data was sent by only 12 of the schools.

The data concerning characteristics of middle school foreign language programs are presented in tables one through five. Table 1 presents data regarding the goals of middle school foreign language programs. Table 2 reports the primary methodological approach, whereas Table 3 reports additional approaches and strategies used by the teachers. Table 4 presents data regarding the primary instructional focus of the foreign language class. Many teachers failed to identify either one primary approach or one primary focus of instruction. For this reason, Tables 2 and 4 indicate a category that reports a combination answer. Table 5 presents the primary means used to teach culture.

Results and Conclusions

Goals

The most frequent goals of the middle school foreign language programs surveyed were "to develop tolerance, understanding and appreciation of other languages and cultures"

and "to develop motivation and readiness for future foreign language study", reported by 95% and 90% of the respondents, respectively. These goals are reported frequently in the literature for exploratory programs. However, the demographic data indicated that only 40% of the teachers reported teaching any part of their day in an exploratory program. The majority of teaching experiences were in sequential classrooms, with 73% reporting that they either taught exclusively in sequential programs or part of the day in a sequential program. It appears, then, that the above goals are also important goals in sequential programs. Perhaps the middle school philosophy that has inspired exploratory programs may be influencing the goals of sequential programs as well. These goals do not conflict with goals stated by the profession for communicative competence in the language.

Other frequently reported goals were "to learn basic elements of vocabulary" (85%), "to develop proficiency in the foreign language" (83%) and to "teach basic grammatical structures" (73%). "To learn basic elements of vocabulary", is also a goal often reported for exploratory programs. The high percentage of teachers reporting this as a goal (85%) would indicate that teachers in both exploratory and sequential programs considered it an important goal. Further research may be needed to clarify the differences in goals between exploratory and sequential classes.

The moderately high reporting (73%) of " to teach basic grammatical structures" as a goal may indicate that this goal is related more directly to sequential classes than exploratory classes, since the demographic data indicated that an equal percentage (73%) of the teachers were teaching primarily in sequential classes. However, the data do not discriminate whether these particular teachers were those indicating grammar as a goal. What the data do show is that, although the Oral Proficiency Movement recommends an emphasis on communication rather than grammar, the latter continues to be a somewhat important goal of the middle school foreign language class.

Of the highly reported goals, "to develop proficiency in the foreign language" was the goal most congruent with the communicative approach. Although proficiency was rated by a large majority as a goal, other data in the NADSFL survey indicated that opportunities were not being provided frequently

enough for skill use among students. The document data, though meager, also seemed to support a lack of emphasis on proficiency. Of the documents sent by 12 schools, only five represented commitment to programs with a communicative proficiency orientation.

One of the least frequent goals was "to integrate the learning of language with other curricular areas", reported by only 53% of respondents. It appears that only moderate attempts are being made to involve foreign language instruction in interdisciplinary initiatives in the curriculum, despite the fact that both oral proficiency proponents and middle school experts recommend this integration (Curtain & Pesola, 1988; Maryland, 1989; Met, 1988, 1991; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1986; Nerenz, 1990; North Carolina, 1991; Savignon, 1991).

Statements in the literature relate to the finding that few instructors have a goal of integrating foreign language instruction with other disciplines. Cellini (1992) found that the foreign language instructor frequently is not part of the interdisciplinary team structure of the middle school. George and Shewey (1994) state that the foreign language program is not an integral part of middle school programs. It is possible that these situations may be influencing the low priority given to interdisciplinary instruction as a goal. It is also possible that the basic training of many foreign language teachers does not include an emphasis on interdisciplinary teaching strategies.

The lowest reported goal (35.9%) was "to develop general knowledge and appreciation of the English language." The lack of emphasis on this goal is congruent with goals of the Oral Proficiency Movement, which emphasize objectives that focus on the use of the target language.

Instructional approaches and foci

The majority (71.8%) of the middle school foreign language teachers reported using, as a primary methodology, a combination of communicative approaches, or a communicative approach in combination with another method (85%). Only 14.5% indicated that they used a grammartranslation approach, either primarily (5.5%) or in combination with another approach (9.0%).

In spite of the large percentage of teachers reporting the

use of communicative strategies, data from the NADSFL checklist showed that the teachers infrequently engaged in the principal characteristics of the communicative approach. These included characteristics such as frequent skill use by students in the classroom and opportunities for students to simulate real conversation.

When asked to identify other approaches used in the classroom, the most frequently reported item was the whole language approach. (Weaver, 1990, defines whole language principally as a philosophy, but concedes the necessity to use the phrase "whole language approach" to define an environment in which the activities predominantly reflect such a philosophy. The term is accepted within the foreign language profession as one of a myriad of communicative approaches or strategies under the umbrella of the Oral Proficiency Movement.) The frequency of this finding would appear highly congruent with the profession's recommendation for the use of skill-integrated approaches that promote the construction of meaning rather than memorization. Nevertheless, since teachers in the interview stage of the research were unable to give a clear and complete definition of this approach, the accuracy of this finding may be questioned. They generally equated the whole language approach with simply teaching all four skills, missing important hallmarks of whole language practice such as storytelling, the use of advanced organizers for instruction, making connections, interrelationships between skills, contextualizing instruction, recycling, etc.

The two other most important secondary strategies reported by the teachers were the Total Physical Response (73%) of the teachers, and the instructional use of authentic materials from the target culture (60%). The Total Physical Response (TPR) (Asher, 1966, 1969), a technique involving a series of commands in the language to which students respond physically, represents a strategy that engages students in processing meaning. Both the use of TPR and the use of authentic materials are congruent with the recommendations of the Oral Proficiency Movement.

No other secondary strategy showed widespread use among the teachers. In particular, very few teachers (21.8%) reported intentionally using strategies to address the affective, or emotional, domain. This represents a cause for concern, since foreign language learning has been shown to be a highly

anxiety-producing experience, regardless of age (Horwitz, 1991). Middle schoolers, in particular, are in a developmental stage that is characterized by increased anxiety due to lowered self-concept, self-confidence, or self-esteem (George & Lawrence, 1982, Eichhorn, 1966, 1984; Epstein & Toepfer, 1978; Hill, 1980; Milgram, 1992; Thornberg, 1981). Since foreign language experts agree that anxiety inhibits foreign language proficiency (Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Horwitz, 1991; Oxford, 1990), it appears that efforts to reduce anxiety may be needed for improvement in the middle school foreign language curriculum.

Table 4 reports data indicating the focus of classroom instruction, rather than any specific instructional strategy. The Oral Proficiency Movement recommends an emphasis upon developing communicative competence within the classroom. However, the data indicate that, for the majority of the teachers, speaking was not the primary focus of the class. Only 41% of the respondents reported speaking as the primary focus. Another 38.3% reported speaking as a primary focus in combination with another item, raising the percentage of those teachers who view speaking as at least an important focus, if not as a primary focus, to 79.3%. The data, however, do not discriminate to what extent speaking may have taken precedence in combination with these other items. Almost 15% of those reporting speaking in combination with another skill mentioned it in combination with grammar, indicating that, for those teachers, grammar continues to be an important focus.

The reporting of speaking as an important focus seems to indicate that the tenets of the Oral Proficiency Movement have been accepted in the belief systems of the teachers as the definition of what constitutes effective instruction. Whether teachers, in fact, are focusing their instruction on speaking is a topic for further classroom research. The fact that only 41% of the teachers reported speaking as the primary focus may indicate that not enough time is being spent on the target language in class. As indicated above, data in another stage of the research implied that skill use did not predominate.

While grammar was named as a primary focus alone by only 5.9% of the respondents, another 31.2% identified it as a focus in combination with another skill. Thus, a little more than one third of the teachers (37.1%) reported that it was a highly important focus of instruction. This is not surprising, since, as stated previously, 73% indicated grammar as a classroom goal.

However, this emphasis is not congruent with the recommendations of the Oral Proficiency Movement, which state that formal grammar instruction should be minimized. It appears that an emphasis on grammar instruction maintains a moderate foothold in the middle school curriculum.

Culture instruction was of low priority as an instructional focus, with only 1.7% reporting it as a primary focus, and another 23.4% reporting it as an important focus in combination with another item. The total number of teachers considering culture to be an important or primary focus of instruction (25.1%) seems rather low, in light of the fact that culture is generally considered in the literature to be a significant part of the exploratory class (Kennedy, 1985; Kennedy & DeLorenzo, 1985, 1994, Littlefield & Grenier, 1987; Sherer & Biemel, 1987) and that almost 40% of the teachers were teaching in an exploratory program. It appears that culture is not being integrated greatly into either sequential or exploratory programs. In view of the importance given by the foreign language profession to the integration of culture as a means of contextualizing and providing meaning to instruction (Kramsh, 1991; Nerenz, 1990; Met, 1988), the low priority given to culture instruction represents an area for improvement.

The data also show that culture instruction was highly dependent upon secondary sources such as films, readings, etc., with 41% of the teachers reporting that they used these primarily to teach culture. Only 27.8% of the teachers reported that they relied primarily on first-hand experiential means to teach culture. Another 29.9% reported they used a combination of both sources. The conclusion may be drawn that 57.7% used some direct, experiential means to teach culture, but that, in general, the teaching of culture primarily by experiential means occurred in less than one third of the classrooms. Since both oral proficiency proponents and middle school experts recommend an experiential approach to instruction for this age group (Compton, 1983; Curtain & Pesola; Dorman, Lipsitz & Verner, 1985; Lounsbury & Vars, 1978; Maryland, 1989; Met, 1988; North Carolina, 1991), the data seem to imply a need for improvement in the curriculum in this area as well.

Summary

The most prevalent goals of the middle school foreign

language programs were "to develop tolerance, understanding and appreciation of other languages and cultures" and "to develop motivation and readiness for future language study". These appeared to be important goals for both foreign language exploratory classes and sequential courses. One of the least prevalent goals was "to integrate the learning of language with other curricular areas." The lack of frequency of this goal may represent an area for improvement in the curriculum.

The majority of teachers reported using a combination of communicative strategies as their primary methodology, implying that the aims of the Oral Proficiency Movement have had some effect on instruction. However, other data in the study showed that key elements of communicative approach occurred less than frequently. Moreover, few teachers intentionally used strategies to address the affective domain, indicating a possible lack of congruence between the recommendations of foreign language experts (who recognize a negative correlation between anxiety and foreign language learning) and classroom instructional practice.

The majority of teachers reported that they used a whole language approach, but the interview stage of the study revealed they had difficulty defining whole language instruction. Further research is needed to clarify this discrepancy.

Less than half of the teachers reported speaking as the primary focus of classroom instruction, although 79% reported it as an important focus. Such a focus is congruent with the Oral Proficiency Movement's emphasis upon communication. However, other data in another stage of the study indicated skill use did not predominate. Further classroom research is needed to clarify the actual amount of time devoted to speaking.

Grammar instruction was reported by a majority of the respondents as a goal and by over one third of the teachers as an important classroom instructional focus. The maintenance of the importance of grammar instruction in these classrooms contrasts with recommendations of the Oral Proficiency Movement for a reduced role for grammar instruction.

Culture instruction was generally of low priority, and was highly dependent upon secondary sources, although the majority of teachers reported using, at least at times, some experiential means at times to teach culture. These findings indicate a need to emphasize the teaching of culture in the curriculum and for the improvement of instruction through a more experientially-based

approach to culture.

Implications

The study highlights four major areas of concern for the middle school foreign language curriculum—the lack of goals to integrate foreign language with other disciplines, the lack of emphasis upon culture instruction, the absence of intentional efforts to address the affective domain, and the lack of emphasis upon speaking as a primary focus. Secondary areas of concern indicated by the study involve teacher's perception and use of a whole language approach and the degree of importance attached to the teaching of grammar.

To address the lack of integration of foreign language with other disciplines, administrators should make efforts to encourage interdisciplinary planning and involvement by foreign language teachers in the middle school team structure. Foreign language methodology classes should also include strategies for interdisciplinary instruction. Further research should be undertaken to examine the issue of integration of foreign language with other disciplines.

The role of culture within the foreign language curriculum needs to be addressed. Teachertraining institutions need to provide experiences that help teachers gain an understanding of the importance of integrating culture into the curriculum in ways that facilitate language learning and provide first-hand connections to real life.

The affective domain needs to be more directly emphasized within the curriculum. Teacher-training programs should stress the importance of strategies that enable students to reduce anxiety about foreign language learning. Other motivational and additudinal issues regarding foreign language learning also must be addressed in these programs.

The profession needs to continue to emphasize the importance of target language use in the classrooms. Further classroom-based research needs to de done to determine to what extent teachers actually focus classroom instruction on speaking and to what extent students are successful in speaking.

The study indicated a discrepancy between the reported use of a whole language approach and the understanding of such practices.   Further research is necessary to determine to what extent whether middle school foreign language teachers

understand and practice elements of whole language instruction. Foreign language teacher training programs may need to provide more experiences in the meaning and use of whole language instruction as part of communicative approach.

Teacher training programs for foreign language teachers must be diligent in addressing the issue of the role of grammar instruction in the foreign language classroom. Training needs to provide teachers with strategies for contextualizing grammar so that, when grammar instruction is necessary, instruction is communicatively-based.

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Table 1. Goals Of Middle School Foreign Language Programs

	N			%		
	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
To develop tolerance, understanding and appreciation of other languages and cultures	222	12	234	94.9	5.1	100.0
To develop motivation and readiness for future foreign language study	211	23	234	90.2	9.8	100.0
To learn basic elements of vocabulary	200	34	234	85.5	14.5	100.0
To develop proficiency the foreign language	195	39	234	83.3	16.7	100.0
To teach basic grammatical structures	171	63	234	73.1	26.9	100.0
To provide varieties of language experiences suited to students' interest	152	82	234	65.0	35.0	100.0
To enhance the under-standing of our own culture and language	151	83	234	64.5	35.5	100.0
To develop career aware-ness of the usefulness of foreign language	141	93	234	60.3	39.7	100.0
To integrate the learning of language with other curricular areas	125	109	234	53.4	46.6	100.0
To develop general knowledge and apprecia-tion of the English language	84	150	234	35.9	64.1	100.0

Table 2. Primary Methodological Approach

	N	%
A combination of communicative approaches	168	71.8
Grammar-Translation Method	13	5.5
Audio-Lingual Method	8	3.4
The Natural Approach	4	1.7
Other	3	1.3
A mix of any of the above approaches	35	15.0
No response	3	1.3
Totals	234	100.0

Table 3. Other Approaches and Strategies

	N			%		
	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
Whole language	171	63	234	73.0	27.0	100.0
Authentic materials	166	68	234	71.0	29.0	100.0
Total Physical Response	141	93	234	60.3	39.7	100.0
Cross-cultural strategies	84	150	234	35.9	64.1	100.0
Global awareness strategies	72	162	234	30.8	69.2	100.0
Affective strategies	51	183	234	21.8	78.2	100.0
Conversation only	38	196	234	16.2	83.8	100.0
Other	10	224	234	4.3	95.7	100.0

Table 4. Primary Focus of Instruction

	N	%
Speaking	96	41.0
Grammar	14	5.9
Culture	4	1.7
Other	17	7.3
A combination answer	103	44.1
Totals	234	100.0

Table 5. Primary Means of Teaching Culture

	N	%
Readings, books or films about the culture	95	40.6
Sampling of cultural experiences	65	27.8
Combination of the above	70	29.9
No response	4	1.7
Totals	234	100.0