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José Villavicencio

The Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century (1996) include the five goals of Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities and are incorporated throughout Georgia’s Curriculum Standards-based curricula:

- focus on communication
- define culture as the relationship among perspectives, products, and practices
- integrate content with language learning
- apply language skills to the world beyond the classroom
- assist student in making meaningful comparisons (Georgia Learning Connections, QCC FL, 1999)

Based on these standards that require that instruction be proficiency-oriented, the teacher must plan activities that develop the students’ ability to communicate in the target language. To become proficient in the target language, the students must use the language in meaningful exchanges and in activities that promote moving up the proficiency scale as defined by the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for K-12 Learners (1999). These guidelines specify what the students should be able to know and do in the target language. With these standards in mind, the teacher should design lessons that facilitate the interaction in the target language in culturally authentic communication exchanges with the use of authentic material; e.g., newspapers, magazines, legends, stories, radio, video and exchange programs (Georgia Learning Connections, QCC FL, 1999). Authentic materials are those that are prepared for specific use by and for speakers of the target language. Technology provides an avenue that enhances outdated textbooks, brings the outside world into the classroom, and gives the student opportunities to communicate in the target language in more culturally authentic language experiences. Special care should be taken in preparing educationally sound activities and in selecting appropriate level material.

According to the theories of Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, and those influenced by them, students learn best when they are actively engaged in authentic learning or learning where the students are allowed to participate in inquiry situations to construct their own meaning (Arends, 2004, p. 153) and activities that connect with the “real world” (Parkay & Stanford, 2001, p. 554). With these goals in mind, a lesson should include opportunities for the students to solve the problem in different ways, allow students to contribute, use multimedia, involve different senses, involve different intelligences, require communication, and be sufficiently difficult to be challenging (Oakes & Lipton, 2003, p. 231).

Shrum and Glisan (2000) propose an interactive model that involves all three modes of communication: interpersonal, interpretive and presentational. According to Shrum and Glisan, the student will acquire new information through the interpretive mode by viewing, listening, or reading authentic text; through the interpersonal mode, students share information and ideas found in the text; and through the presentational mode the students create oral or written projects. As with all lessons, the role of the teacher is to ensure that the materials selected be age and level appropriate, interesting and challenging. The teacher must also guide the students to do the activity successfully by referencing vocabulary and cultural differences that require further explanation for clearer understanding, checking for greater understanding by asking higher level thinking questions, and applying and using what has been learned to a new situation. This model can be applied to several types of authentic text: written, video or audiotape that contain interdisciplinary topics.

The topics and appropriate levels are indicated in the Georgia standards and these guidelines should be referenced to develop age and level appropriate lessons. However, there are other issues that must be kept in mind when developing lessons that will require the use of the Internet. The sites that the students will visit have to be carefully selected to match the topic of the lesson that needs enhancement. The teacher will need to plan for specific questions that promote greater understanding of the material, use strategies that develop multiple intelligences, form questions that develop higher order thinking skills, consider the Standards that the lesson address, and be mindful of what the student will do with the newly acquired concepts or information.

The Internet is an excellent resource to obtain authentic materials to prepare lessons that are based on the Standards and that are educationally sound. An activity may look like the following example:
Lesson name: A visit to the Prado museum via the Internet.
Level: IV or V
Topics: Aesthetic pursuits, Art
Standards addressed: Communication, Culture, Connections, and Comparisons
Communication skills addressed: reading, speaking and writing
Thinking skills addressed: comprehension, application, and synthesis
Intelligences addressed: visual-spatial, verbal-linguistic, and intrapersonal
Communication required: interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational
Reading strategies employed: Pre-reading, careful reading, post-reading
Type of lesson: language-learning and uses of authentic documents, research (CFLP/CLTA, 2001).

- Students will be asked to name famous painters and identify the country of origin. They will share the information they know with each other and the class. They will also share their previous personal experiences in museums they have visited.
- The teacher will review historically relevant information that is based on the “trip to the Prado”.
- Students working with individual computers or in dyads will be given a specific internet address to visit.
- The students will be asked to skim the reading, to look for cognates, and to look for words that they can guess contextually. They will predict the gist of the material read.
- They will share their results with the class.
- They will then read the story carefully, answer comprehension questions and write a summary of what they have read.
- They will then share with the class.
- As an extension activity, they will select a painter or painting and explain it to the class, or produce a pamphlet that advertises El Prado.

In summary, in a classroom where proficiency is the objective, there is no better way to engage the students, use up-to-date material, and bring the world into the classroom, than to use authentic materials and the Internet.

References


Dr. Jose A. Villavicencio is an Associate Professor of Education at Columbus State University in the Department of Teacher Education. His current research interests include second language instruction and diversity in education.