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## 21st Century World Language Education: Issues of Target Language Use

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### **Abstract**

*World language educators face many challenges progressing into the 21st century. This research describes the practices of world language educators and presents a rich description of what constitutes an engaging 21st century world language classroom. The use of the target language as a crucial component in the world language classroom as well as barriers and challenges to its use emerged from this qualitative research. Among the obstacles identified are variations in pedagogical approaches, support of target language use, issues of language choice, and conflict between student and teacher perspectives. The research also highlights the benefits of professional development.*

### **Background**

World language educators face many challenges progressing into the 21st century. Among them are the pedagogical practices observed in current classrooms. In West Virginia, there have been many informal conversations about these issues, but despite identification and recognition, there has been no formal evaluation of them. An examination of these problems is necessary for the improvement, expansion, and potentially the future funding of world language education at all levels. The lack of available data for planning professional development opportunities also hinders applications for grants.

In collaboration with the West Virginia Foreign Language Teachers Association and the West Virginia Department of Education, an online survey was developed. The survey was sent to language teachers, administrators, and other professionals in the field throughout the state to gain insight into the current practices of world language educators at all levels and to identify the aspects of world language instruction that needed improvement. The results of this study begin to paint a picture of the world language educators in the state, as well as some of their classroom practices and the reasons behind them. The responses gathered provide useful and pertinent information for teacher education programs and practicing teachers, and they can help guide the implementation of professional development and support.

One emerging theme was the use of the target language in the 21st century world language classroom. In 2010, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) added the following position statement to its list of recommendations for world language teaching: “ACTFL . . . recommends that language educators and their students use the target language as exclusively as possible (90% plus) at all levels of instruction during instructional time and, when feasible, beyond the classroom” (ACTFL, 2010, p. 1). ACTFL’s position reflects the notion that the use of the target language promotes comprehensible input, negotiates meaning, and encourages self-expression as well as opportunities to use language spontaneously, to learn language strategies, and, thus, to receive feedback (ACTFL, 2010). This recent statement reaffirms Krashen’s (1981) earlier work showing that language acquisition occurs when students are exposed to communicative and comprehensible language input rather than an overemphasis on grammar, translation, or drill exercises.

Additionally, the Center for Applied Linguistics completed a ten-year survey in 2008 that compiled data on the use of the target language in the world language classroom. Thirty-six percent of world language teachers reported using the target language more than 75% of the time in their classroom versus 22% in 1997 (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2008). These figures indicate an upward trend in the use of the target language in the classroom nationwide. Such information supports the notion that it is important to investigate the role that this practice plays in the 21st century world language classrooms, in particular, in West Virginia.

### *Varied Pedagogical Approaches*

Numerous inquiries have been completed in recent years on the 21st century world language classroom and the difficulties in implementing the target language. Many researchers have concluded that teachers hold a wide variety of interpretations concerning communicative language teaching and theories on the use of the target language in the classroom. Defining communicative language teaching and appropriate use of the target language for the 21st century world language classroom can be difficult (Edstrom, 2006). As a result, teachers usually take an eclectic approach to instruction and use what works for the topic at hand (Cook, 2001). These individuals recognize that sometimes it is necessary to take the path of least resistance in the classroom, and many times they are not fully aware of which language they are using (Morris, 2001; Wilkerson, 2008). Despite these diverse interpretations, research supports the benefits of maximizing the use of the target language in the classroom. It is, after all, the main source of comprehensible input and meaningful interaction, in particular for learners with limited or no access to communities that speak the target language (Kim & Elder, 2008; Thompson, 2006).

However, research does not support the exclusive use of the target language in the classroom. Research favors the use of both English and the target language given what is known about linguistic variations and code switching (Thompson, 2006). Overreliance on either English or the target language can be

disadvantageous for students. Too much English, especially when class is students' only exposure to the target language, robs students of learning opportunities (Turnbull & Arnett, 2002). In the reality of the classroom, teachers need to employ all resources at their disposal, including the prior knowledge, and it is important to view both languages as tools.

### *Language Choice*

Use of the target language in the 21st century language classroom remains world language teachers' primary means to help students develop language skills, appreciate cultures other than their own, and transfer what they practice in the classroom into a real world context. Research indicates that language learning is an experiential process (Crawford, 2004), and students must interact with the various aspects of a language if they are to be true 21st century world language learners.

It is also important to note that if teachers do not use the target language, it sends a strong implicit message about the value of the language and the need to speak it. While some may claim the classroom is an artificial environment, to the students it remains very real; and students seem to view teachers' use of target language as natural, even if they respond in English themselves. Consistent use of the target language by teachers engages students in the learning process (Crichton, 2009)

The decision to use English or the target language in the classroom stems from four groups of factors.

**Students:** Classroom behavior and discipline matters are challenges that frequently inhibit teachers from using the target language (Bateman, 2008). There are situations in the classroom when speaking English may get the students' attention more effectively than speaking the target language (Cook 2001). Teachers identified students' ability level and their anxiety as factors that limited use of the target language in the classroom. Acceptance of the target language on the part of students often affects the teacher's choice of language. Many teachers, concerned that their students would not be receptive to their use of the target language in specific circumstances, chose to speak English instead (Kim & Elder, 2008; Wilkerson, 2008).

**Teachers:** Teacher attitudes, confidence, background, fatigue, motivation, fear of overloading students in their learning efforts, and pedagogical views, especially regarding grammar instruction are all elements that determine language preference (Bateman, 2008; Edstrom, 2006; Kim & Elder, 2008; Wilkerson, 2008). Other factors, such as departmental culture and colleagues who do not incorporate the target language as part of their instruction, can also pose challenges. While teachers may believe in the value of using the target language, their classroom procedures tend to vary greatly (Morris, 2001). Their language choice may be based on what they have observed in their own teachers, what they have learned

from the student teaching experience, or from participation in professional development opportunities (Bateman, 2008; Morris, 2001).

**External factors:** A lack of time to cover a large amount of material to meet specific curricular goals can also inhibit instruction in the target language and limit opportunities to apply the target language to more realistic contexts (Morris, 2001). Societal attitudes towards other cultures and language learning can further hinder instruction in the target language (Kim & Elder, 2008; Morris, 2001).

**Language specific:** Classes made up of students with a wide range of abilities makes implementation of the target language more difficult. It can be challenging to maintain attention and motivation in the classroom if the teacher is confronted with a broad spectrum of student abilities. Using English to circumvent communication breakdowns is a strategy employed by many teachers. Finally, many teachers believe that there is a need to explain complex grammatical concepts in English (Kim & Elder, 2008; Morris, 2001).

### ***Conflict between Student and Teacher Perspectives***

Perhaps the most interesting trend noted in the literature is the discrepancy between student and teacher perspectives. Brown (2009) finds that beginning students in particular tend to have unrealistic and narrowly defined perspectives of language learning. While teachers value information exchange within a real-world context more than discrete grammar points, students appear to not value such communicative exchanges. Additionally, Brown notes that students tend to favor explicit grammar instruction. These student preferences may arise from comparisons between world language classes and other classes in which the information transmitted may be more explicit and precise.

Language choice has an effect on student motivation. If too much English is spoken, students will not recognize the need for the target language; excessive use of the target language may impede understanding and result in reduced student motivation (Turnbull & Arnett, 2002). Teachers tend to favor students using language earlier than the students prefer, especially among beginning students (Brown, 2009). To bridge the gap between conflicting student and teacher perspectives, it is important that teachers educate students about the communicative method and how it facilitates language acquisition. Brown (2009) suggests three specific areas of world language teaching that instructors should discuss with their students: error correction, grammar teaching, and paired or group work. Contrary to what some instructors might believe, not all students have a negative opinion of the target language use in the classroom nor do they feel that the use of English is essential to their learning.

Rolin-Ianziti and Varshney (2008) point out that understanding student attitudes and pre-conceptions is important in language teaching in order to foster improved communication in the language classroom. They began by investigating student perceptions of communicative language classrooms. The authors reported

that students felt they needed some English in order to reduce anxiety, avoid confusion, and understand instructions. Furthermore, use of English was found to aid understanding grammatical concepts. However, they found that students also recognized the need for exposure to the target language. Students understood the benefits of hearing the language, being immersed in it, and of having a context for their learning. Students acknowledged that while too much English can slow the learning process, it also provides an easy way out for some students and limits the learning for others. They understood how easy it is to become dependent on English, and they noted that they would be more likely to pay attention to the target language if English were not as readily provided. Furthermore, students recognize that overuse of English forces translation, in particular word-for-word translation.

Students tend to become anxious when presented with the use of the target language in the classroom (Krashen, 1981). Levine (2003) found that the strongest predictor of target language-use anxiety appears to be the amount of target language use itself. Students who reported higher target language use in their world language classes tended to report lower levels of anxiety about its use. Correspondingly, instructors who reported higher levels of target language use in their classes tended to perceive lower levels of target language-use anxiety in their students. Clearly, such a finding is important because an increase in target language use does not necessarily equal heightened anxiety for language learners. Levine suggests that many students feel comfortable with target language use once they become accustomed to it. Research conducted by Nicolson and Adams (2010) supports the use of the target language because they found that students were primarily satisfied to have their class taught mostly in the target language. In fact, students expected more Spanish as the course progressed. Even though some were intimidated initially, they readily accepted the value of having courses in the target language to aid learning.

### **Benefits of Professional Development**

One area of notable importance is the training and professional development opportunities available to teachers. While it is true that teacher education programs and professional development tend to push for the elimination or the reduction of English use in the classroom, it is also true that these same mechanisms support teachers in using the target language to its full potential. Teacher training should ensure that instructors are equipped with the necessary skills to incorporate a high proportion of the target language into their instructional practices. Additionally, they should be trained to understand the relationship between the target language and English as it relates to the classroom (Kim & Elder, 2008). Departmental promotion, course coordination, teacher research, and training play a large role in providing teachers with ways to implement the target language into their courses. Morris (2001) suggests that methodology courses can be significant in supporting or even challenging teachers' efforts to implement the target language in their classrooms. Teachers often mirror the practices of their former

instructors (Morris, 2001), and it is important that mentoring, whether direct or indirect, continue to be acknowledged as a valuable source of information and training and implemented in teacher training and professional development opportunities.

## **Methods**

In order to gain insight into what is currently occurring in 21st century world language classrooms in West Virginia, a qualitative online survey was developed. The questions used in this instrument were the result of collaborations between the president and the vice president of the West Virginia Foreign Language Teacher Association and the West Virginia World Language Coordinator. Questions were formulated from classroom observations, discussions, comments heard at conferences, and from informal discussions between teachers and faculty at all levels. The survey maintained a qualitative focus in order to allow trends and issues to surface. Close-ended questions were minimized.

Using the database of all world language educators in the state, the survey was sent by e-mail to 302 individuals. Seventy-three world language educators responded, for a response rate of 24%. Of the respondents, 56 were K-12 teachers, 18 were university faculty, and 4 were teachers or facilitators for the state's virtual school. Data were collected between April and June 2010.

## **Findings**

During the data analysis phase of the research, multiple issues surfaced which provide insight into the realities of the 21st century world language classroom in terms of best practices and use of the target language. Responses to the first question what constitutes a good world language classroom were grouped into several key areas. The most salient finding from the study was the definition of a good 21st century language classroom. Responses indicated that the classroom should be relaxed and comfortable and should support risk taking. Ideally, the teacher should be enthusiastic, energetic, and motivated. Participants noted that the learning environment should be student-centered and foster communication between the teacher and student as well as between students. Respondents specified teacher and student language fluency and language skills as a crucial element of a 21st century world language classroom.

Respondents also noted three categories that are important for quality language learning: a variety of instructional activities to help students build language skills, the use of authentic materials, and effective instruction using the target language. Additionally, the participants cited a variety of factors that affect language use in the classroom and students' attitudes that tend to hinder world language instruction. Finally, the participants discussed professional development.

### *Engaging Activities*

Teachers responded to a list of common activities used in a world language classroom compiled from informal discussions and observations of world language classrooms in the state. The response showed that educators at all levels were knowledgeable about many different types of activities. However, when asked about their classroom strategies, the most frequently used strategies were group work (51%), open-ended question-and-answer activities (47%), book work (43%), bell-ringers or warm-ups (35%), and worksheets (33%). Fifty-one of the 73 respondents (70%) identified a textbook as one of their main sources and 22 respondents (30%) listed the textbook as their only or primary source of instructional materials. Responses indicate that TPRS (Total Physical Response Storytelling), a strategy that involves storytelling and play-acting and enables prolonged exposure to the target language, was used least by participants in the survey.

### *Realia and Other Authentic Materials*

Participants indicated that the use of realia was an essential component of the 21st century classroom, especially when exposing students to culture. They noted that authentic materials can be a source of comprehensible input and motivation for students. Twenty-one respondents (29%) identified realia specifically as something they used to support their learning objectives. The use of newspapers or other materials was much more limited; only five of the respondents reported using them on a consistent basis. While many textbooks include these kinds of materials, having realia in a tangible form helps students develop a stronger appreciation for real language and culture. In particular, participants noted that the use of realia helps students make connections between their native language and the target language and overcomes barriers to language learning.

### *Classroom Use of Target Language*

Most respondents agreed with the benefits of using the target language in the classroom, and they expressed that effective modeling exposes students to the target language and culture(s). They stated that using the target language is a goal and obligation when teaching languages. As one respondent noted,

Use of the target language allows students to hear it as much as possible and to become accustomed to words and accents. Using the target language to talk to students and to give instructions allows them the opportunity to function in the language. There is also the psychological barrier to be overcome, the subconscious assumption that the new language is inferior to the native language for *real* communication. While this may

be true in a sense for the beginner, some students seem to have trouble realizing that in other places, people actually think in and use the new language in everyday situations.

When asked to rate their level of confidence in the target language, 65% of the respondents indicated they felt very confident in their language skills. One in five (20%) felt somewhat confident while 15% felt confident enough to teach, but recognized that they needed improvement. When asked how much they utilized the target language in the classroom, only 35% of all respondents used the target language more than 75% of the time. Twenty-one percent indicated that they use it 51-75% of the classroom time, and slightly less than half (44%) use it less than 50% of the time. Of that group, 16% responded that they use it less than a quarter of the time with students or not at all. University instructors reported using the most target language, with 69% indicating that they use it more than 75% of class time; and virtual school teachers used the least with less than 50% target language use. Forty-seven percent of middle school teachers and 42% of high school teachers who responded indicated that they used the target language 75% of the time.

When asked how much students use the target language, respondents reported that only 36% of the students use it for more than half of classroom time. Thirty-three percent of the sample indicated that students use the target language less than 25% or very little or not at all. This limited use of the target language by students was similar throughout all levels.

### *Factors Affecting Language Use in the Classroom*

Although educators appeared confident to teach using the target language, there appeared to be barriers to doing so. Respondents were asked to provide the reasoning behind their use, or lack of use, of the target language in the classroom. The primary issue identified as hampering target language use was classroom management. Respondents believed they spent too much time dealing with behavior problems and related matters and felt they needed to use English to maintain control and make instructional progress in the classroom. One respondent wrote

It is difficult to use the target language when you don't have full control of the students in your classroom. It also makes things very frustrating for students in level 1 classes because they really don't have any idea what I'm talking about and they have no desire to try to figure it out. It's also exhausting to keep up the constant game of charades.

Other respondents noted low student motivation as the reason behind their language choice. Teachers also noted that a lack of the time necessary to utilize the target language and allow students time to understand and respond also limited implementation of the target language.

Many respondents expressed concerns that students need to learn the structure of the language explicitly through grammar instruction in English or through translation of the target language into English. Respondents noted that without this structure, students would not learn the language properly, and they stated that students do not know the grammatical structures of their own language.

Additionally, respondents expressed concerns over student responses. A common theme was a lack of student effort or lack of response when teachers use the target language. In situations where students are taking the world language only to fulfill college entrance or graduation requirements, teachers believed that too much target language use would decrease student motivation. “[Students] don’t put a lot of effort into trying and have little faith in their abilities. They seem insecure and frightened to try. They think the only language they need to know is English.” Teachers also noted that in many school districts there is limited contact with native speaking communities, and lack of contact with native speakers can affect student responses. In addition, peer pressure was an important element that inhibited students from attempting to use the target language. Nevertheless, respondents recognized that it was their responsibility to set up the students to progress toward more confident language use and to build an appropriate comfort level in the classroom.

Respondents indicated that they wanted to use the target language more but were forced to scale back due to administrative or enrollment issues. One respondent explained, “I use [an immersion approach] often, especially with my Spanish I students, but the principal expects me not to use [it].” Incorporating the target language into instruction was found to be challenging when administration, parents, or other authorities are concerned about enrollments or about student complaints because they do not understand the target language. At the college level, these objections translated into negative student evaluations, and they appeared to have an effect on tenure and promotion. Participants also expressed concerns about class scheduling, indicating that classes that did not meet on a regular basis or met on a reduced schedule made use of the target language more difficult. The lower number of contact hours reduced student retention and willingness to accept the target language in the classroom.

### *Student Attitudes that Hinder Instruction*

A final issue identified as affecting the use of the target language in the classroom was the limitations of local culture and acceptance. Participants noted that many communities in West Virginia are small and lack a diverse population. Responses revealed that it was difficult for students to connect language study to the real world, and many parents question the value of and need for world language learning in their children’s lives. Teachers commented that the culture in the region is unreceptive, and many students feel that world language is a waste of time, and neither they nor their parents feel it is important. To overcome some of the challenges faced by teachers who want to use the target language in the classroom, some of respondents cited that it was effective to tailor their instruc-

tion to the class level and specific students. By gradually increasing exposure, students could become accustomed to communicating in the target language.

### *Participation in Professional Development*

To overcome some of the barriers to language teaching in a rural environment, respondents expressed the value of continued professional development to improve their knowledge and ability to use the target language. Many teachers indicated professional development opportunities help create a sense of community. Only 2 of the 73 indicated they did not currently pursue professional development opportunities. In both cases, they had been teaching for 15-20 years and no longer saw the benefits of investing time and money in professional development. When asked what type of professional development participants preferred, 67% indicated they attended state organized professional development activities. Twenty-five percent stated that they attended national conferences, and 21% reported attending regional world language conferences. Slightly more than half (53%) reported preference to attend state world language conferences. Fifty-three (73%) indicated that they participated in local meetings with other world language teachers. Despite the expressed value of strong language skills in the classroom and the benefits of target language use described above, only 32% indicated they participated in language immersion experiences. Program cost and time away from family were cited as primary barriers to participating in such experiences.

## **Discussion**

Survey responses were sought to describe 21st century world language classroom from language teachers' perspectives. When compared to national averages, West Virginia's language teachers reported using less target language in the classroom (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2008). The findings from this study helped to identify contributing factors associated with decreased time using the target language in the classroom. It was found that West Virginia's world language teachers used the textbook as one of their primary tools in the classroom. However, excessive reliance on the textbook appeared to detract from the focus on the target language, especially when the textbook used extensive English.

Data analysis indicated that these teachers remained concerned about the need to use English for explicit grammar explanations. While pedagogical reasons exist for doing so, given the knowledge base regarding linguistics and second language acquisition, it is important that world language teachers confront perceptual differences between language students and their teachers (Brown, 2009). Research shows that one of the reasons teachers use the target language less in class is fear that students will become anxious, a phenomenon described by Krashen (1981). Students tend to react more negatively and are more likely to be anxious if they are not accustomed to hearing and using the target language in their classroom (Levine, 2003). Therefore, it is essential to educate students on what they will experience in an environment enriched by the use of the target language (Brown, 2009). Furthermore, when administrators and other faculty members are confronted

with conflicts arising from the use of the target language in the classroom, understanding these perspectives can help build support for both instructors and students. (Brown, 2009).

Additionally, this study found attitudes of a community with limited exposure to the world languages and cultures may affect the use of the target language in the classroom. To overcome perceptions of the irrelevance of learning another language and culture, students, parents, and the community must be shown the educational benefits, values, and advantages derived from contact with other cultures and the reality that in the 21st century, a monolingual society is neither viable nor the norm.

Data from this qualitative survey support other research (Bateman, 2008; Morris, 2001) and help demonstrate that while teachers believe strongly in the advantages resulting from the use of the target language in the classroom, the realities of the classroom and other external factors influence their willingness or ability to do so. Finally, the importance of participation in professional development opportunities is essential for world language educators. It is through teacher training programs, conferences, and state professional development opportunities that teachers can gain support for and be encouraged to use the target language as the valuable tool it can be in the 21st century world language classroom. The opportunities should include coursework on language learning theories and second language acquisition, language immersion and study abroad experiences, conferences that focus on both theoretical knowledge and practical information to help teachers understand second language learners, and practical ways to address the challenges that arise in any classroom. Teachers should be persuaded to attend these conferences and supported financially wherever possible. Additionally, given the value of mentoring, those who have been successful in implementing the target language into the classroom should be provided opportunities to share their knowledge with their fellow teachers.

Findings from this study can serve to help educators and governing bodies to determine the types of professional development needed to increase the use of the target language in the classroom. They may also serve as a way to educate the community and school administrators on what to expect from a good 21st century world language classroom. Matters counterproductive to implementing these best practices for even the most well trained instructor include a lack of classroom time, questions of classroom management, student response, student and parental attitudes, administrative response, and very limited exposure to other cultures. The results of this survey reveal the need for continued support and professional development for our teachers as well as education of the general public regarding the value of world languages and a broader worldview.

Nevertheless, this research has its limitations. One issue that arose was difficulty in reaching all world language educators in the state ( $N = 487$ ). Currently, the primary method of contacting a geographically scattered population is an electronic mailing list. However, participation is strictly voluntary, and not all world language educators subscribe.

Findings from this study show that it is important to know more about the types of activities world language teachers use in their classrooms, the textbooks teachers use, and why they choose to use such materials. In-class observations of world language teachers and qualitative interviews would serve to increase the knowledge regarding 21st century world language classrooms. World language teachers face many challenges in providing quality language instruction to 21st century learners and additional research is clearly warranted.

Note:

1. The survey is available online at <https://spreadsheets.google.com/viewform?hl=en&pli=1&formkey=dF9lcUhZbTVuUFpMdUktS053Y1h1VWc6MA#gid=0>

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