

## What Happens When the PD Is Over? A Year Inside Teacher Classrooms

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Catherine Ritz, *Boston University*

### Abstract

*Although standards for world language education have brought forth a needed shift in instructional practices—moving from traditional to communicative, proficiency-based methods—research suggests that many teachers have yet to modify their practices. This study follows three teachers at the K-12 level who attended a summer professional development event, intending to implement proficiency-based practices when returning to their classrooms. Teachers were observed and interviewed throughout the course of the school year to examine their experience when attempting to implement the proficiency-based practices, and the factors that propelled them toward or discouraged them from implementing these practices. Results showed that concrete, surface-level practices were more easily implemented than those that required deeper understanding. School and program leadership emerged as an important factor in each teacher’s likelihood of experiencing success.*

### Key Words:

proficiency-based instruction, standards-based instruction, professional development

### Introduction

The paradigm shift in world language education has been widely discussed (e.g., Kaplan, 2016; Kissau & Adams, 2016; Moeller, 2018; Swanson & Mason, 2018). With the establishment of standards in world language education (Lafayette, 1996) and expanded

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**Catherine Ritz** (EdD, Texas A&M University) is a Clinical Assistant Professor and director of Curriculum & Teaching and Modern Foreign Language Education at the Boston University Wheelock College of Education & Human Development. Her degree is in Curriculum & Instruction. She taught French and Spanish at the secondary level for close to 15 years in addition to serving as the Director of World Languages, 6-12, in a public school district near Boston. She currently teaches courses on world language methods, second language acquisition, and curriculum and instruction. Catherine is the author of the book *Leading Your World Language Program: Strategies for Design and Supervision, Even If You Don’t Speak the Language!* (Routledge, 2021).

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research into second language acquisition beginning in the 1970s and 80s (Mitchell et al., 2019), world language teachers have been asked to adopt new methods and practices that better support the development of communication skills in the language (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). While various methods have come and gone (Richards & Rodgers, 2014), contemporary approaches (VanPatten, 2014) ask teachers to adopt communicative/proficiency-based instruction to best reflect the national standards and support their learners' language development. ACTFL (2020a) has additionally outlined guiding principles for teaching that identify specific practices considered “core” and “high-leverage,” including the use of the target language by teachers and students, backward design planning, and integrating communicative tasks, to name a few. Communicative/proficiency-based instruction, however, has not been widely or universally integrated into teaching practices (Glisan, 2012; Pufahl & Rhodes, 2011).

While research has looked at ways in which the standards and communicative/proficiency-based instruction is or is not being implemented (Glisan, 2012; Troyan, 2012), there is a need to understand the experience of teachers who are attempting to shift their practice from more traditional, grammar-based approaches to communicative/proficiency-based instruction, as well as the contextual factors that may contribute to or undermine their success. This study follows three teachers at the K-12 level who attended a summer professional development event with the intent to implement communicative/proficiency-based practices when returning to their classrooms.

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## Background

### Communicative/Proficiency-Based Instruction

The shift toward communicative world language teaching began in the 1980s (Omaggio Hadley, 1986) and was followed by the development of *National Standards in Foreign Language Education* in the 1990s (Lafayette, 1996), which were given the sub-title “a Catalyst for Reform.” Early on, researchers noted the “general confusion about, and even resistance to, reform in classrooms and programs” (Whitley, 1993). In a review of how the standards have impacted teacher practice, Glisan (2012) noted that “[t]eachers and administrators may be growing too confident that their programs are Standards-based when in fact all they have done is attach new labels to existing curricula and classroom practices” (p. 521). Indeed, a national survey of teacher programs and practices (Pufahl & Rhodes, 2011) found that only 36% of teachers use the target language for at least 75% of classroom time (p. 266), and other studies (Glisan, 2012) note that teachers believe they are developing Interpersonal activities for their students when there is in fact an “absence of oral interpersonal communication” in their classroom (p. 517). Forty years of reform have not resulted in the widespread adoption of communicative, proficiency-based methods by world language teachers (Glisan, 2012).

### Professional Development (PD) Event

The Massachusetts Foreign Language Association (MaFLA) launched the MaFLA Proficiency Academy in 2015 with the goal of training its members in proficiency-based world language teaching methods. This PD event is a four-day summer training that includes a focus on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (2012); designing proficiency targets and using can-do statements for lesson and unit objectives--such as including “I can describe my family” as a lesson objective, modeled after the NCSSEFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements

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(ACTFL, 2017)<sup>1</sup>—backward design unit and lesson planning; performance tasks; Integrated Performance Assessments (IPAs); assessment rubrics; and teaching for proficiency using the Teacher Effectiveness for Language Learning framework (Tell Project, 2019). Each afternoon, participants work in small groups to apply learning and prepare materials to use when they return to their classrooms in the following school year. In the five years that the event has been run (2015-2019), over 550 world language teachers and administrators have attended. The aim of the MaFLA Proficiency Academy has been to equip teachers to implement a shift in their practice, moving away from more traditional methods toward proficiency-based instruction.

Although this event is designed to reflect best practices in professional development (PD), including a clear content-focus, active learning on the part of participants, collective participation in which teachers work collaboratively to develop material for their own classes, and coherent goals in the focus and outcomes (Desimone & Garet, 2015), it is time-limited and therefore does not meet another important criterion: sustained duration, meaning that professional development is ongoing throughout the academic year. Nevertheless, research

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has shown that professional development can have an impact on teacher learning, even if it occurs during a summer learning program (Borko, 2004), particularly when the focus is on explicitly developing subject-matter knowledge. Professional development that holds a close “proximity to practice,” (Penuel et al., 2007, p. 928)—meaning it directly prepares teachers to implement new practices in their own classroom environment—is also shown to be effective. Ultimately, professional development must result in implementation of learning in the teacher’s own classroom. Changing teacher practices is a complex and multifaceted process that involves not only teacher knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs (Martel & Bailey, 2016; Brown, 2017; Heyd-Metzuyanim, 2019), but also intensive work by teachers, financial and administrative support, and the existence of policies and structures within the teachers’ school (Boudah et al., 2001; Buczynski & Hansen, 2010).

### Conceptual Framework

Coburn (2003) argued that in order for innovations to be adopted or school reform to take place—in this case the reform of shifting from traditional to proficiency-based world language instruction—it is insufficient simply to look at the number of schools or programs that report adopting the reform.<sup>2</sup> Rather, to measure the true scale of innovation adoption, four “interrelated” qualitative dimensions must be considered: “depth, sustainability, spread, and shift in reform ownership” (Coburn, p. 4). Depth refers to a real and significant change in classroom practices and teacher beliefs. This can range from lack of adoption of new practices to “surface manifestations” of change to “deeper pedagogical principles” where the teacher has developed a deep understanding of and ability to implement the practice (Coburn, p. 4). Sustainability refers to long-term continuation of reforms, particularly when the initial supports put in place to implement the innovation have ended. Sustainability reflects a shift in school culture upon broad adoption of the reform, as well as “mechanisms” within the school structure that support implementation of the reform (Coburn, p. 6). Spread may initially be conceived of as the innovation or reform spreading beyond one

1. The “can-do” statements referenced throughout this article refer to teacher-made student learning outcomes developed for their own classes.

2. Coburn’s (2003) work focuses on implementing reform in the K-12 context.

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classroom or school, but in Coburn's conception, spread additionally includes spread of the innovation or reform *within* one classroom. When teachers adopt an innovation, they also adopt the underlying principles that drive its design, which may then be applied to other aspects of teaching. Spread may occur to other classrooms in a school, within the district, or be codified in school policies. An innovation or school reform may be initiated by "external actors" and be controlled by a "reformer;" shift in reform ownership occurs when those who implement the innovation (e.g., teachers, school leaders) take on its responsibility. This conception of innovation adoption encompassing depth, sustainability, spread, and shift in reform ownership provides a meaningful framework for measuring adoption of new practices in a more holistic way than simply numerically counting the number of schools that report adoption of the innovation.

### Research Questions

The study seeks to address the following questions:

1. After participating in a professional development (PD) event and returning to their own classrooms, how do teachers experience a school year in which they attempt to shift their teaching practices?
2. What types of proficiency-based instructional practices are challenging for world language teachers to implement?
3. What propels world language teachers toward or discourages them from implementing intended shifts in teaching practice over the course of a school year?

## Methods

### Participants

Teachers were selected as candidates for participation in this study after an initial screening survey. All teachers who had enrolled in the PD event for the first time (approximately 71 teachers) were sent a survey inviting them to participate and to determine their level of familiarity with the topics presented at this professional development event. Teachers of any modern world language who were attending this event for the first time were invited and considered for participation in the study. Twelve teachers responded to the initial screening survey. Some were screened out since they had already attended the event, and another was located in a different geographic region making it difficult for in-person observations on the part of the author. After the initial screening, four teachers were selected for participation, including one middle school French teacher, two high school Spanish teachers, and one high school Mandarin teacher. These teachers were then interviewed prior to attending the PD event. Permission to observe teachers in their schools was obtained over the summer for all but one teacher (one of the high school Spanish teachers) who was then removed from the study. The remaining three participants included (pseudonyms used for privacy) were

- Pat: A middle school French teacher in an urban school district
- Daniel: A high school Spanish teacher in a suburban school district
- Yiting: A high school Mandarin teacher in a suburban school district

Pat is in her seventh year of teaching middle school French in an urban school district near Boston, having taught science for 20 years before switching to language teaching. Acknowledging her "training was a little bit different than the person who majored in languages in college and kind of went that route kind of thing," Pat explains that her undergraduate degree was in environmental interpretation, which meant training to be a

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guide. She holds a master's degree and, despite the change in subject-matter, has always taught at the middle school, an "age level I'm very comfortable with and I enjoy." Pat's middle school serves grades 6, 7, and 8, and enrolls approximately 300 students. The student body is comprised of 57.9% high needs students, 31.8% economically disadvantaged students, 21.7% students with disabilities, and 58.9% non-white students of color (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019). The world language program is overseen by a district world language director (K-12) who is responsible for evaluating the world language teachers. In Pat's school, there are only two world language teachers: she and a Spanish teacher. There is also a district world language instructional coach.

Daniel is a high school Spanish teacher who has taught for three years and is a self-described "nerd" who is "obsessed with this profession." He is beginning his first year in a new school district, which he applied for specifically because "they are one of the biggest people right now in the proficiency movement." He holds a master's degree and has a background in foreign language education. His previous school district was beginning to shift its practices toward teaching for proficiency but having "seen some of the stuff they've done" in his new district, he was motivated to switch schools. His new high school enrolls approximately 1,500 students in a suburb of Boston, comprised of 23.2% high needs students, 5.6% economically disadvantaged students, 16% students with disabilities, and 29.8% non-white students of color (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019). In the high school, the world language program is led by a department head who is responsible for evaluating the 12 world language teachers. The program offers courses in French, Spanish, German, Mandarin Chinese, and Latin.

Yiting is a native of China who has been teaching Mandarin in her current high school part-time for seven years. Before teaching, Yiting had been a guidance intern in the school, intending to become a guidance counselor. It so happened that the school was looking for a Mandarin teacher and, "because I was the intern and they interviewed me and they thought it's a good fit," she was hired to teach Mandarin. Although it wasn't Yiting's original plan to be a language teacher, she feels it "really helped me to connect with students," which was her goal in working in education. The high school is a regional school serving two neighboring towns in the suburbs of Boston. The regional high school enrolls approximately 675 students, comprised of 18.1% high needs students, 4.6% economically disadvantaged students, 14.5% students with disabilities, and 17.7% non-white students of color (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019). In the high school, the world language program is led by a department head who is responsible for evaluating the nine teachers. The program offers courses in French, Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, and Latin.

### Instruments & Procedures

#### *Teacher Interviews*

Each teacher was interviewed five times over the course of the year, for approximately 30-60 minutes each time. The first interview was conducted prior to attending the MaFLA Proficiency Academy. Interviews two, three, and four were each conducted immediately following a classroom observation, once in the fall, once in the winter, and once in the spring. The final interview was conducted at the end of the school year.

Interview guidelines were developed for each interview using a "semistructured life world interview" approach. "This kind of interview seeks to obtain descriptions of the interviewees' lived world" following "an interview guide that focuses on certain themes and that may include suggested questions" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 31-32). In the

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preliminary interview, the interview guidelines focused on discussing their background, teaching style, goals for attending the professional development event, and their vision for an ideal world language class. In interviews following classroom observations, the interview guidelines included asking teachers to reflect on the lesson they had just taught, discuss successes and challenges that teachers were experiencing as they attempted to implement new practices, as well as additional information on the world language program (such as program leadership, teacher evaluation, collaboration). The final interview guideline asked teachers to reflect on their growth over the course of the year, successes and challenges they faced, and their overall experience in attempting to implement new practices. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The researcher additionally recorded analytical memos after each interview to record observations and reflections in relation to the research questions.

**Teacher Observations.** The three teachers were observed in their own classroom for a full class period three times over the course of the school year: once in the fall, once in the winter, and once in the spring. Narratives of each observation were written during each observation and were then reviewed after the observation to ensure that no salient points were omitted. The narratives were written as objectively as possible and attempted to record significant details about the lesson. Particular attention was taken in the narratives to record language use by teacher and students, student learning outcomes and lesson structure, types of activities related to mode of communication (interpretive, interpersonal, or presentational), checks for understanding, and closure of lesson. While these areas of focus were intended to ensure that pertinent aspects of the lesson were recorded, the narrative guidelines were not overly prescriptive to capture the actual events in the classroom.

### *Data Analysis*

**Teacher Interviews.** First cycle coding involved a combination of attribute and initial coding. Attribute coding was used to note “essential information about the data and demographic characteristics” of the participants and their teaching context (Saldaña, 2016, p. 82). Attribute coding focused on background information about each teacher as well as significant features of their school and language program. Initial, or open, coding was used to begin data analysis and to look for emerging themes. Following guidelines for initial coding, any “proposed codes during this cycle [were] tentative and provisional” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 115).

Second cycle coding led to a categorization of the initial codes. Categories were then further analyzed by placing them within the four categories of Coburn’s (2003) framework for innovation adoption: depth, sustainability, spread, and shift in reform ownership.

**Teacher Observations.** Observations were coded by specific practice within three categories: Lesson Structure & Implementation (lesson objective, previewing agenda, checking for understanding, closing the lesson); Language Use (teacher target language use, teacher English use, student target language use); and Activity Type (interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational). These codes were determined prior to beginning the observations and were selected to reflect essential practices within the context of communicative/proficiency-based instruction. Codes were then further analyzed using magnitude coding, which Saldaña (2016) defines as adding a “subcode...to indicate its intensity, frequency, direction, presence, or evaluative content” (p. 86). Each code was assigned a sub-code of weak, developing, or strong, according to an evaluative determination regarding the practice.

Prior to assigning these sub-codes, a determination of *weak*, *developing*, and *strong* was determined for each code. When looking at lesson objectives, for example, lack of a

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lesson objective (either written or orally presented to the class) constituted a rating of weak. If the teacher had a lesson objective, but it was either only written on the board but not presented, or it was orally stated, but not written, this constituted a *developing* rating. If the lesson objective was both written and orally reviewed with students, this constituted a *strong* rating. When a practice was not present in the observation but should have been following standard practices in proficiency-based instruction, this was noted in the observation narrative and coded. One such example would be the lesson objective, which should be present in every lesson. However, if the practice was not present but was also not a required part of the lesson—such as using activities that focus on the various modes of communication, which may or may not be included in a given lesson—this was not recorded in the observation narrative and was also therefore not coded.

**Researcher Memos.** Immediately following each observation and interview, the researcher recorded an analytical memo reflecting on the experience of the teacher and connections or contrasts between the observation and how the teacher described the experience during the interview. These memos were reviewed during data analysis to assist the coding process.

### Results

#### Starting Points

Despite their different backgrounds in education and experiences as world language teachers, Pat, Daniel, and Yiting expressed common goals, challenges, and vision for their classes before attending the MaFLA Proficiency Academy. Each teacher had general familiarity with communicative language teaching, being aware of essential practices such as teaching in the target language, some familiarity with the modes of communication, and student-centered instruction.

Two specific instructional challenges were shared among all three teachers that connected to their goals and motivation for attending the MaFLA Proficiency Academy: teaching in the target language and getting students to use the target language. Pat, Yiting, and Daniel were all aware of the 90%+ target language use expectation prior to the event but reported that the realities of the classroom often made this difficult to implement. According to the participant's self-reported levels of confidence, Daniel was the most confident teaching using the target language, but when students were put in groups he acknowledged that they "want to speak in English." Pat and Yiting expressed more of a struggle to use the target language themselves, with Pat sharing that she "[got] the thing on immersion, but [didn't] do it very well." "I feel I break into English to give instructions, key instructions, and stuff like that." Yiting acknowledged that she was "half/half" English and target language use. "I'm struggling," she shared. "Parents always talk about the target language. When I speak English...I feel really ashamed." The struggle to teach in the target language corresponded to a goal for each teacher in what they hoped to achieve by attending the MaFLA Proficiency Academy, with Yiting stating, "I really hope I can achieve the target language...90% using the target language, even [starting in] level one."

Each teacher also expressed other specific challenges that they hoped they would be able to overcome through their learning at the MaFLA Proficiency Academy. Daniel expressed doubt on how to integrate interpretive tasks and rubrics, effectively use can-do statements, and advance students from one proficiency level to the next. Pat shared her concern about spending too much time presenting information to the class and not engaging her students in using the language enough, as well as trying to integrate more authentic resources, and do more writing, reading, and listening activities. Yiting felt that her background as a counselor put her at a

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disadvantage since she lacked training in world language pedagogy, and she wanted to attend this event to learn more. She was unsure if the activities she was designing for her students were engaging for them since students are learning basic language skills but are high school age.

Although the teachers sought to learn how to address their teaching challenges at the MaFLA Proficiency Academy, only Daniel expressed no fear or nervousness about shifting his instructional practices: “I actually kind of love change,” he said. For Pat and Yiting, however, the thought of changing their practices revealed some real fear about what they may lose. Yiting’s background in counseling came through as she repeatedly expressed worry that she would “lose the connection” with her students if she only spoke Mandarin with them. She was also worried about the lack of collaboration opportunities for herself in her school district. As the only Mandarin teacher, she felt she had no one to work with and share the burden of developing new instructional materials. The perceived amount of work required with proficiency-based instruction was also shared by Pat, who worried about the need to “throw your whole curriculum out and start from scratch.... I’m a little anxious about that. But maybe that’s what needs to happen.”

Regardless of each teacher’s specific fears and challenges, their vision for an ideal world language classroom was consistent: it would be one in which students were spontaneously and naturally using the target language with each other and the teacher. Yiting shared: “What may be the perfect class? Like even when I talk about their feelings, ‘Did you break up with your boyfriend or girlfriend?’ I can talk to them in Chinese.... I can communicate on a deeper level in the target language, that’s my goal.” Daniel shared a very similar sentiment, stating, “Ideally, it’s everybody just like speaking at all times in Spanish. For some reason, I have this image of even the jokes, like when they’re talking to each other, are in Spanish. That would be ideal for me.”

### **Depth vs. Surface Manifestation: Target-Language Use & Learning Objectives**

Classroom observations and interviews revealed a number of proficiency-based practices that were adopted with varying ranges of depth by the three teachers. Target-language use—by teacher and students—is an easily observable practice, while often being challenging for many teachers to implement. Using the target language comprehensibly and facilitating target language use among learners is considered both a core practice by ACTFL (ACTFL, 2020a) and a high-leverage teaching practice for its impact on student achievement (Glisan & Donato, 2017). Across Daniel’s three classroom observations and interviews, his own target-language use consistently remained high, and he increased the level of student target language use in each of the observations. Interviews revealed a lack of concern about his own target language use; it had become a normal and deeply integrated part of his practice. His focus on target language use shifted more to his students, and he was attempting to raise their level of Spanish to close to 100%. Daniel began the year by establishing expectations that his students speak Spanish in class, and as he began to implement this new strategy, he was invigorated: “I love those moments where they ask: ‘¿Puedo hablar inglés? [Can I speak English?]. And then I say no. And then they explain to me what they wanted to say in Spanish anyways and they say it perfectly fine.... Those moments are so cool for me.”

For both Pat and Yiting, however, target language use remained problematic. Although Yiting achieved close to 90% teacher target language use in her first observation, she expressed frustration and struggle that remained with her throughout the year:

I don’t think it’s 90%. For me, it’s maybe 70%, but from 90, it’s so hard to achieve 90%, I think especially when they are last period, like Friday. They don’t have the

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motivation and maybe other classes, they had a very low score and they were very depressed. That's really hard to engage them, to model with them, if using target language. That's my challenge and sometimes I really just use English to connect to, like inspire, to recharge them. High school is so stressful.

Yiting was able to use a number of strategies to maintain the target language while teaching (particularly the use of body language and gestures), but her students' use of Mandarin was very limited during observations. Her concern about connecting to students in the target language presented a real challenge for her that she found difficult to overcome. Despite evidence in each of the three observations of her ability to deliver a lesson in the target language that was comprehensible to students, she switched into English in every class at times that appeared unnecessary. The struggle to maintain the target language and encourage student target language use came from her worry about being unable to connect with students on a personal level, as well as her concern for the discrepancy between the student's cognitive and linguistic abilities: "This is really a challenge for their intelligence. But the speaking is so basic vocabulary. It's their level of intelligence. Not like the Mandarin. Doesn't match. I need to find the balance between the two." Yiting demonstrated an understanding of the essentials of teaching in the target language in her classes but lacked a deeper understanding of how to achieve the expectation while maintaining rich relationships with her students and engaging them on a cognitive level.

Pat's experience in target language use was largely different from both Daniel and Yiting. In her first classroom observation, the researcher estimated approximately 90% English use during class time, with French only used by Pat when reading scripted conversations which the students then repeated. Increasing target language use had been one of Pat's goals in attending the MaFLA Proficiency Academy, and when she was asked about this after the observation, she expressed minimal concern: "I still feel like I need better tips on giving directions and staying in the language. Some of it's just the finessing, finding different ways of getting kids to talk." The second and third classroom observations revealed a more concerted effort to use the target language, though it would be best categorized as a "surface level manifestation" (Coburn, 2003, p. 4) rather than a deep understanding of the practice. In the second observation, Pat had established a classroom contest to get students to use French in class. This was a specific practice discussed at the MaFLA Proficiency Academy, where each class is given a certain number of points each week, and when anyone in the class uses English, the class loses a point. This leads up to a reward at a certain point if the class keeps a given number of points. In the second observation, Pat maintained the point system for approximately 30 minutes during class, after which she told the students they would switch into English. Although Pat applied this new practice in one of the observations, her implementation of it and quick return to English demonstrated a superficial understanding. Students used the target language minimally in each of her classroom observations. Later in the year, Pat shared her need for more support in target language use, particularly with regard to classroom management, which was a consistent issue in her classes: "Some of these things like classroom management techniques ... something like that, I still feel like I need better tips on giving directions and staying in the language."

The teachers' adoption of the practice of using student learning outcomes in their classes also represented a range in their depth of understanding. The MaFLA Proficiency Academy had focused on the use of can-do statements for lesson and unit objectives. Each teacher showed a different level of depth in applying can-do statements in their own classes. Daniel consistently used can-do statements. In his first observation, his lesson objective was "I can describe my ideal vacation." Although in his first observation, the objective was only

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written on the board and not reviewed with students, in the second and third observation, Daniel reviewed the objectives with students at the beginning of class, although he did not return students' attention to the objectives to check for student learning at the end of the classes. He described being able to write objectives that were measurable as well as the conscious choice to use English for the objectives so that all students would understand: "I used to write ones where I was like, 'I can talk about vacations,' and now I get that you can't measure just *talk*. If you talk, you just spoke.... And I used to write my objectives in Spanish or French or whatever I was teaching. So I know I totally missed a few kids, that just didn't know what the purpose of it was or anything like that." Daniel exhibited clear understanding of the rationale behind the practice of writing student learning outcomes and how to apply it in his classroom, although had yet to incorporate student reflection on the attainment of the objective at the end of the class.

Pat also adopted the practice of using can-do statements. In her first observations, she had a number of these objectives presented to students: "I can introduce myself when I meet someone (at different times of day). I can greet and take my leave in a polite way. I can tell someone my nationality and what language(s) I speak. I can tell someone whether I understand them or not." Pat additionally used the strategy of having a student read the goals in English while she (initially) tried to remain in French. Pat was consciously using these objectives in her practice: "I've also tried to do a lot more with the learning goals. ... I used to kind of do it but I'm doing a much better job ... putting them up there every day." Like Daniel, she did not ask students to reflect on the goals at the end of her classes. Where she struggled more, however, was connecting the lesson activities to the lesson outcome. There were often activities that directly connected to the objective, although she got off topic when classroom behavior became challenging, as it often did in her classes.

Yiting did not use explicit learning objectives in any of the classes observed by the author, and despite prompting during interviews, did not mention can-do statements. When asked what her objective was for the first lesson that was observed, she responded "What's your name? How old are you? Where do you live? Which school do you attend? Which grade are you? That's the conversation." She gave a similar response to the same question in the third observation, saying that the objective was "Just for the students to be able to talk about their daily routines with time, because Chinese they mentioned the subject and then time and then the verb."

### **Spread vs. Lack of Spread: Within and Beyond the Classroom**

Neither Pat nor Yiting exhibited evidence of the spread of proficiency-based practices within their own classroom beyond those focused on at the MaFLA Proficiency Academy. Rather, both teachers attempted—with varying degrees of success—to implement practices such as teaching in the target language, using learning objectives, increasing speaking activities for students, and using performance assessments, particularly those that assessed student speaking. Pat, however, worked throughout the year to spread these practices beyond her own classroom. The other language teacher in her school (a Spanish teacher) had attended the same event the previous summer, and both teachers initially planned to collaborate in re-writing curriculum following the model from the MaFLA Proficiency Academy. Due to personal reasons, however, the Spanish teacher was unable to continue this work and Pat "just kind of had to move on, on my own." Pat had pushed her department head to invite the presenter from the MaFLA Proficiency Academy to come and do a one-day workshop in her district. Although Pat felt this was more "revisiting" material for herself, "everybody [in her district who attended] was really excited," which encouraged Pat. Additionally, Pat was "after [her] department head" to use an external assessment

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measure to look at student proficiency, and she volunteered her students to take it. Her lobbying was successful, and she was able to convince him to test her 7<sup>th</sup> grade French class using the ACTFL Assessment of Performance toward Proficiency in Languages (AAPPL) (ACTFL, 2020b).

For Yiting, being the only Mandarin teacher, she felt restrained to her own classroom and felt that she lacked opportunities to collaborate: “As a Chinese teacher, it’s not only me, a lot Chinese teachers.... And it’s so hard. It’s very hard. And then most, like my age, we didn’t grow up here. And the culture difference, the environment, and how to handle colleagues....” At department meetings, the focus was generally on more logistical topics rather than pedagogical practices, except for one workshop for world language teachers that had focused on the teaching of culture, which Yiting said was the first of its kind. There was no evidence that proficiency-based practices were adopted at Yiting’s school based on interview data.

Daniel’s experience was very much the opposite. He had specifically chosen to work in his school due to their reputation for teaching for proficiency. He therefore joined a school where the spread of proficiency-based practices was already underway. Daniel sought to expand his practices and apply proficiency-based practices across his curriculum, and when he wanted to learn more, was able to access other teachers in the school who had more expertise in areas such as encouraging student self-assessment and self-reflection. Daniel began exploring and learning more about approaching grammar in the classroom, using flipped-learning videos (videos that provide direct instruction on the grammar for students to watch at home rather than using class time), “invitational grammar” (which provides students with a reference guide to the grammatical structure without an in-class explanation and students can choose to use on their own), and the PACE Model (Adair-Hauck & Donato, 1994; Glisan & Donato, 2017).

### **Sustainability & Challenges to Sustainability**

The spread of reform, or lack thereof, within the school where each teacher worked was directly linked to questions of the sustainability of implementing proficiency-based practices in each context. The data demonstrated that sustainability was observed according to two overarching categories: a professional community of colleagues or teachers engaged in the same reform, and school leadership and alignment between school or program policies and communicative/proficiency-based practices.

#### ***Professional Community of Colleagues***

For Pat, she initially was able to collaborate with another teacher on revising her curriculum, but when this teacher was unable to continue the work, she quickly became overwhelmed: “In the fall, I was working off units [we had designed together]. I had lots of time to design in the summer. And now all of a sudden, basically all three classes have kind of finished at the same time and I am really scrambling.” Pat had initially feared that the level of work required to sustain teaching for proficiency would be a concern, and the reality of losing her collaboration partner made this fear a reality. For Yiting, as discussed above, she felt there were no opportunities for her to collaborate with colleagues as the sole Mandarin teacher, and her district did not have collaborative structures in place, such as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) that she could turn to for support. She did reach out to other Mandarin teachers on the internet who were sharing resources and was able to use some material from them. Daniel, on the other hand, was given a mentor to work with in his school, and they collaborated on curriculum. Daniel also had access to a shared folder with curriculum materials so did not need to create his own curriculum from scratch. The

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curriculum had been developed by small groups of teachers in his department, who then brought it to the full group for feedback before it was finalized. Daniel was expected to follow the curriculum and use common assessments but had “freedom” to create his own activities in how the lessons were delivered.

### ***School Leadership & Alignment***

In each of the three teacher’s schools, there was a world language department head who was designated as the “primary evaluator” of the world language teachers. Despite this, the school leadership varied significantly in terms of the number of evaluations and types of feedback teachers received on their teaching as well as the overall expectations for their teaching. Yiting felt there were expectations about target language use for teachers, though they were not followed up on. She shared mixed feelings about the level of autonomy she received: “I’m so grateful and full of freedom. But the other side is, I don’t have colleagues. I don’t have someone to really give me specific, like, guidance or suggestions here.” She received three observations each year, one from the department head and two from the assistant principal. She received feedback from the department head about including peer conversations in class, which she agreed was important, but she did not feel she knew how to include them effectively. From her assistant principal, she had received comments on classroom management. Although Pat’s department head was also her primary evaluator, he did not observe her during this school year, and she was observed only once by her principal, and she wondered aloud “if he knows what’s going on right now.” Regarding expectations for her teaching, she felt there were none. Rather, “I feel like the expectations that are being set are set by me.” During her one official observation, Pat reported that the principal was “pretty happy,” and the only feedback she received was that a few students were not focused during an activity. Despite this, she “didn’t get any practical ideas about how to do something better or improve.” Pat’s school was unique in having a district world language coach, who came more regularly into Pat’s classroom and was “the person who I feel is my support.” In Daniel’s case, as a first-year teacher in his school, he was observed more regularly by his department head and his mentor, both of whom he felt “[give] you good feedback, and...stuff you should work on.” There were clear expectations for his teaching and practice that came through in a number of ways, for example, his department has a grading policy that 75% of the grades must come from performance assessments, and the remaining 25% could be decided by each teacher. The department head also instituted a new practice during this school year in which teachers were asked to conference individually with their students mid-way through the year, looking through and reflecting upon students’ work from the beginning of the year. These mid-year conferences replaced the traditional mid-year assessments and took teachers two full days to complete. This process led Daniel to realize that students wanted to engage in more conversations in Spanish during class time, since this is “what they felt like they lacked,” and in his third classroom observation, there was a corresponding increase in interpersonal activities.

### **Shift in Reform Ownership vs. Lack of Shift**

It was clear that for Pat and Yiting, they owned the decision to make a shift in their own instructional practices, and there was an apparent lack of shifting ownership of the reform to their program’s leadership. While Pat was successful in lobbying her department head to include some new initiatives, such as bringing the presenter from the MaFLA Proficiency Academy to do a workshop in her district, and provide funding for using standardized proficiency assessments, she continued to work mostly independently in her attempts to implement proficiency-based practices. Yiting reported little to no interaction

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with her colleagues on instructional practices, little feedback from her department head, and few learning opportunities within the structure of her program on proficiency-based instruction. Daniel's experience was in stark contrast, where the ownership for shifting toward proficiency-based instruction was led by the department head as well as teachers within his department who were leading curriculum revision task forces. Daniel had also begun presenting on proficiency-based practices at the state world language conference, providing evidence of his ownership of these practices and interest in sharing them beyond his own classroom.

### Discussion

The experience of attempting to implement a shift in teaching practices from more traditional to communicative proficiency-based practices for the teachers in this study varied in large part due to the structural circumstances of their school, in particular the variability in the world language program leadership. Whereas Pat lost her curriculum collaboration partner for personal reasons, the mentoring structure and curriculum task forces established in Daniel's school made his transition to implementing proficiency-based thematic units more achievable. Daniel experienced a break-through in shifting his practice to integrate more interpersonal activities after a student conferencing session that was established by his department head. And the feedback, or lack thereof, that each teacher received on their practice in formal or informal observations either supported or undermined their attempts to implement change. While this study revealed the importance of program leaders in creating structural systems that contribute to the sustainability of innovation adoption, there exists little research on world language leadership in the K-12 context, its role, its impact on teacher quality, or its impact on student learning (Rocque, Ferrin, Hite, & Randall, 2016; Allen, 2018).

Implementing communicative, proficiency-based instruction remains a challenge for teachers, and the lack of leadership may result in too large a hurdle for an individual teacher to overcome.

Implementing communicative, proficiency-based instruction remains a challenge for teachers, and the lack of leadership may result in too large a hurdle for an individual teacher to overcome. While widely understood and accepted as an important practice in world language education, target-language use by teachers and students—particularly in the interpersonal mode—that meet the 90%+ expectation remains a significant challenge to implement (Glisan, 2012). While some research (Glisan, 2012) has pointed to a possible low proficiency level on the part of the teacher in the language as a reason for this struggle, this was not the case for the three teachers in this study, one of whom was a native speaker. There are many reasons teachers may use the L1 during classroom time (De La Campa & Nassaji, 2009). Based on the observations and times when English was used, it appeared that a lack

of depth in pedagogical knowledge may have undermined their attempts to use the target language themselves and support student target language use. When compounded with a lack of feedback or coaching on their instruction, it is not surprising that two of the teachers in this study encountered challenges that at times discouraged them from continuing.

Some surface-level and concrete proficiency-based practices were more easily implemented by the teachers in this study, including using student learning outcomes (except for Yiting) and incorporating authentic resources. However, the deeper understanding needed to successfully incorporate these two elements remained problematic. Authentic resources, for example, can be used to develop interpretive tasks that are then connected to interpersonal discussion, followed by presentational speaking or writing tasks. Selecting

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and deciding to use an authentic resource is a concrete and more easily applied strategy but designing a series of tasks connected to the resource across the three modes of communication requires more from the teacher and is therefore more difficult to adopt, findings that have been supported in other research (Glisan, 2012; Troyan, 2012).

### Conclusion

This study investigated teachers' experiences when attempting to implement a shift in instructional practices—moving from more traditional methods toward a communicative, proficiency-based approach—following a professional development event. The results indicate that structural supports in each teacher's school due to program leadership impact teachers' abilities to successfully change their practice. Classroom practices that are more concrete, such as using a student learning outcome or selecting an authentic resource, may be more easily adopted by teachers. Practices that require deeper understanding, including teaching in the target language, supporting student target language use in interpersonal tasks, and designing tasks across the three modes of communication remain more problematic and require larger levels of support within the teachers' individual educational context.

Communicative/proficiency-based instructional practices have been linked to stronger student outcomes (Dalton-Puffer, 2007; Tedick, 2012; Vynm Wesely, & Neubauer, 2019) highlighting the importance of understanding impediments to teacher implementation. Future research that investigates structural aspects of world language programs in which teachers have successfully moved toward proficiency-based instruction would help illuminate specific leadership practices that could support teachers elsewhere. This study also brings to light the need for additional guidance and professional development to show teachers how to implement more complex practices successfully, as well as how program leaders can provide more support to teachers seeking to shift their practice.

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