

Finding the Student’s Voice: Authentic Assessments Make Language Personal

Beckie Bray Rankin, *French Teacher, Lexington High School (MA)*

Nikki Prasad, *Student, Lexington High School (MA)*

ABSTRACT

Motivating students towards language learning includes embedding meaningful themes, communicative tasks, and authentic assessments. When voice and choice are held as essential qualities of the task, students invest in the resources to make meaning and express their own thoughts, thus moving us away from traditional assessments that emphasize surface-level understanding and towards critical thinking and proficiency. Applying the unit’s learning to an interpersonal or presentational assessment that values not only the structures and vocabulary but also the students’ synthesis makes their language learning personal.

Keywords: *assessment, UDL*

Research on Relevance

“Does it matter to me?” is the implicit filter learning goes through before sticking. Neuroscience reminds educators that meaning and relevancy have a high impact on students’ understanding and retention. Ausubel’s (1963) Meaningful Learning Theory states that in order for learning to be meaningful, students need to have some prior knowledge on the topic, relevant material, and engaging tasks that connect the two. Biochemists Champe, Harvey & Ferrier (2005) insist: “To learn meaningfully, individuals must consciously choose to relate new information to knowledge that they already know, rather than simply memorizing isolated facts or concept definitions,” (p. 10). Expanding on this theory, McCombs & Miller (2007) add that the motivation to learn is directly related to the relevancy of the materials and tasks to students’ lives. When students find a task to be meaningful and eye-opening, their incentive to apply their learnings into their lives in-

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

NECTFL Review, Number 92, March 2024, pp. 197-205. © 2024 by Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.

creases. But beyond simple engagement, teachers must find ways for learning to last. *Making It Stick* authors Brown, McDaniel, and Roediger (2014) found that when students connected with their learning through activities like paraphrasing or applying/transferring skills, there is a high correlation with long term retention. In narrowing the literature to world language education research, Glisan and Donato (2021) underscore meaningful context as a high leverage teaching practice because connecting students' lives to language learning engages learners. Learning a language is often viewed as a difficult task because it requires hours of dedication to practicing, and without drive and proper engagement, students may struggle to find meaning in their learning process. However, when meaningful, choice-based language learning replaces the traditional approaches, students naturally form those lasting connections to their everyday lives.

Research about purposeful learning doesn't surprise teachers. When designing units, teachers can integrate social justice standards and social emotional learning, which connects our students to the global world. Not everyone has the opportunity to immerse themselves in different ways of being and doing, but implementing authentic assignments/assessments that spark students' interests and personal voice goes a long way. Educators find ways for all students to access the curriculum via tenets of Universal Design for Learning such as anchoring (Ausubel, 2012), offering choice (Novak & Rose, 2016), providing multiple entries, and opening assessments to student design (Feldman, 2019). These gold standards checklists help show us *how* to teach in a way that students can transfer their learning, but *what* do we teach? To lift the curriculum from the themes of old (food, clothes), we move towards topics that today's students see in their own world (food trucks, thrifting) with real world assessments designed to lead them towards global citizenship. Opening our curriculum to new topics that foster intercultural understanding allows students to change their perceptions on everyday life to learn not only about other cultures, but to understand themselves in a way that couldn't be done before.

To bring the *how*, the *what*, and the student to the center, here are three examples of assessments that increase student voice and could be tied to several engaging topics for long-term learning. Each assessment requires language production that connects prior learning from interpretive activities of authentic resources. This significant, rich input offers windows and mirrors to students and engages them to think beyond language structures and vocabulary. The assessment examples described below are primarily written by a student (Nikki Prasad) who experienced them as a learner in an Intermediate Mid-High French course, while the details of the assessment mechanics and rubrics are provided by her teacher (Beckie Bray Rankin). The student perspective allows us to see how the assessment makes language learning meaningful, and how educators move from input to output because the content and tasks matter to students.

Sample Interpersonal and Presentational Assessments

***Discussion écrite* (Interpersonal writing)**

The *discussion écrite* starts off with a choice of prompts with a direct connection to what is being taught/worked on in class, but then there's also the real world aspect. Whether it be analyzing a text or a movie, students start off by responding to a teacher-created question by tying together what has been discussed in class with new authentic resources. But then they get the opportunity to go deeper. They

FINDING THE STUDENT’S VOICE: AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENTS

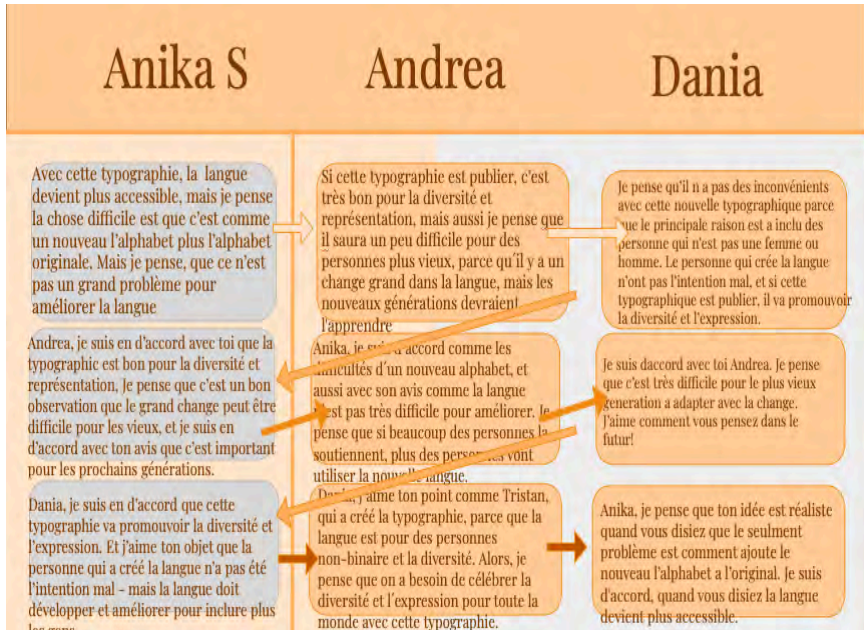
get to ask themselves questions such as, “How do I see this message in the real world?” or, “In what ways can I help others like this character did in the future?” In other words, students can take the prompt in the direction in which they interpret it. And that’s the cool thing to learn about language — the way in which one person takes something in is often not the same as someone else, and that difference is a student’s personal voice. Students also respond to other classmates’ responses which are likely to differ in perspective or in prompt. But again, that’s an important part of learning a language: realizing that other people’s views can be different than yours, but it’s crucial to be open and accepting. The back and forth interaction between students is what allows students to go deeper, to figure out what parts of their identities they might have overlooked or thrown into the mist, and to just learn more about who they are as young adults.

For each prompt, find two short authentic resources that relate to the topic of study. In this example, Intermediate Mid French students read Saint-Exupéry’s (2001) *Le petit prince*. After the first five chapters, they are given the option to focus on the Prince’s routines or the Astronomer’s clothing and how it relates to today. One prompt discusses a racist social media post about a politician’s outfit and the other gives statistics about the time consuming activity of getting the day’s water in countries that don’t have indoor plumbing. Each class is set into a group of 3-4 students who share access to a collaborative Google Doc. Each student decides which prompt to cover and indicates that after their name on the left column. In the first chunk of time, students select their prompt, review the resources, and formulate their question. If they are stuck or need a brain break, they can read what their other group members are writing. The second chunk of time focuses on this written discussion, where each groupmate comments on each other’s post, and then the original post writer responds to the comment (see Figures 1 and 2). Depending on the language level of the learner, this can be done in one class or extend into a second.

Figure 1
Interpersonal Writing Template

Membre 1: _____ Option ____	Member 1 writes their initial post here. Member 2 will comment. Member 1 will respond. Member 3 will comment. Member 1 will respond. Member 4 will comment. Member 1 will respond.
Membre 2: _____ Option ____	Member 2 writes their initial post here. Member 1 will comment. Member 2 will respond. Member 3 will comment. Member 2 will respond. Member 4 will comment. Member 2 will respond.
Membre 3: _____ Option ____	Member 3 writes their initial post here. Member 1 will comment. Member 3 will respond. Member 2 will comment. Member 3 will respond. Member 4 will comment. Member 3 will respond.
Membre 4: _____ Option ____	Member 4 writes their initial post here. Member 1 will comment. Member 4 will respond. Member 2 will comment. Member 4 will respond. Member 3 will comment. Member 4 will respond.

Figure 2
Completed Interpersonal Writing Template



A note for lower levels: In a Novice High or Intermediate Low course, these prompts may be written on the first of a deck of slides with sentence starters and/or vocabulary words on the following slide. Then, each group can fill a separate slide with their discussion.

The rubric (see Figure 3) separates the expectations for the first post and their participation in their discussion to separate the initial presentational writing from the interpersonal writing. In each of these sections, the rubric highlights the relevant content (examples, details) as well as the communication strategies (paraphrasing, negotiating) important to the assignment. The final row is for language use, which is across both the initial post and the students' comments and responses. Before submitting, students italicize their personal example or intercultural comparison, underline transition words, bold risks they take with new language structures, highlight complex structures in purple, and highlight descriptions (the structure for the unit) in yellow. This way, students are giving themselves feedback before submitting, and also directing the teacher's attention to the important elements.

Une leçon (Interpersonal speaking)

Students are used to having their teacher conduct each lesson of each class. However, when they are presented with the opportunity to teach and engage the class themselves, it's a completely new, but important, experience. With this, students engage in a creative learning experience. Students present the material they are responsible for, and—to make it interactive and engaging—they come up with

FINDING THE STUDENT’S VOICE: AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENTS

activities and games to draw the class in and invite them to share their voices. Through the interaction between the presenter and the rest of the class during these mini activities, students are able to share their valuable lessons and/or personal experiences with each other. And that’s when connection happens; students realize they’re not alone, and that their voice matters just as much as anyone else’s. The purpose of this type of assessment isn’t to merely present facts, but rather to interact with each other in a meaningful way. A student can take away so much more than what the words on a slide says: they take in the presenter’s voice, hopefully helping them form their own.

Figure 3
Interpersonal Writing Rubric

	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	NY
1^{er} poste	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>intercultural comparison</i> - full, complete, specific answer - multiple details from <i>le Petit Prince</i> (1,2,3) - details from prompt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>personal example</i> - basic, repetitive answer - a reference to <i>le Petit Prince</i> - a main idea from prompt 	
Conversation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - detailed responses - paraphrase + negotiate for meaning / clarify - respond always + a ? adds to each conversation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - basic responses - paraphrase to ensure understanding - respond to all comments 	
Language Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - easy to understand - use <u>transition words</u> to create paragraphs - accurate complex structures - rich, irregular <u>descriptions</u> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - needs some interpretation - organizes with simple sentences - risks complex structures, accurate basic - risks rich <u>descriptions</u>, accurate basic 	

Une leçon (Interpersonal speaking):

Students are used to having their teacher conduct each lesson of each class. However, when they are presented with the opportunity to teach and engage the class themselves, it’s a completely new, but important, experience. With this, students engage in a creative learning experience. Students present the material they are responsible for, and—to make it interactive and engaging—they come up with activities and games to draw the class in and invite them to share their voices. Through the interaction between the presenter and the rest of the class during these mini activities, students are able to share their valuable lessons and/or personal experiences with each other. And that’s when connection happens; students realize they’re not alone, and that their voice matters just as much as anyone else’s. The purpose of this type of assessment isn’t to merely present facts, but rather to interact with each other in a meaningful way. A student can take away so much more than what the words on a slide says: they take in the presenter’s voice, hopefully helping them form their own.

Ideally, this task is based on a large resource with as many components as students. For example, in a class of 25 students, divide a movie into 25 scenes or a text into one section per student. Most importantly, the student “teachers” must understand what the goal of their teaching is: to lead the class to better understanding

through interaction—not to make a flawless one-way presentation. In focusing on the success criteria, or list of required elements of the lesson, the students find themselves able to interact with the class rather than just read from a memorized presentation. For this particular unit on Saint-Exupéry’s (2001) canonical text, each student had a chapter or two to present to the class and the criteria included a brief summary, comprehension questions, vocabulary, noting language structures, and analysis. To be successful, student “teachers” engage the class with activities like chronologies and turn and talks, games like Kahoot or Gimkit, and Socratic discussions. Their creativity is fun to watch unfold as they learn how to engage each other. As always, the rubric (see Figure 4) follows the key elements of the assessment, which in this case were more about students’ ability to communicate their understanding of a text.

Figure 4
Une Leçon Rubric [A Lesson Rubric]

Criteria	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations
Content	Summary: Succinctly identifies and paraphrases the most important plot points + ... activity in presentation; applies learning from text to life	Summary: Identifies and restates some of the chapter’s key moments Analysis: Shows some understanding of characters, themes, chapter lesson, and their importance
Lesson Structure & Strategies	+ ... flows smoothly between well-directed, fresh, humorous, and engaging activities + ... quotes from text and a new, engaging game that practices the definitions in context. + ... beyond the obvious, described thoroughly + ... selects essentials, ensures classmates have full & correct answers	Lesson is logically structured, interesting, interactive, with continuity and clarity Vocab meanings are practiced with a game Adj/adv are irregular and not repetitive; rules explained Class responds to most chapter questions
Impact	Presenter engaging due to eye contact, structure accuracy, and dynamic (memorized) delivery + ... complex structure accuracy, varied vocabulary, visuals	Presenter comprehensible due to understandable structures Slides engaging due to key words highlighting important information and simple, accurate structures

**A note for lower levels:* This type of task also works well for songs, where individual students could each take two lines or groups of students, in a jigsaw style, can take one stanza each. After analyzing the meaning, each student or group can create a visual and engage the class in an activity to understand the meaning and practice the vocabulary of that section. Requiring students to pay attention to certain language structures is an excellent way to integrate inductive grammar in context.

Personifying a piece of art (presentational speaking):

With this activity, students are provided with the opportunity to personify an art piece of their choice. Art is a way for students to learn about expressing themselves, but also seeing the expressions of the world around them. Students are able to select a piece that appeals to them, research it, and really immerse themselves into the specific form of expression. In the process, students figure out what makes the piece unique and what its message is. Throughout, students are exposed to new ideas and new symbolic aspects that they find they can apply to their own lives. As

FINDING THE STUDENT’S VOICE: AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENTS

they quite literally put themselves in someone else’s shoes, they learn about the essence of seeing the world from a new perspective, which learning a language conveys perfectly. When students are given the opportunity to explore different cultural aspects with their own freedom like this assignment, they are able to have a meaningful learning experience while trying to find their creative voice.

As part of a unit on representation—how we perceive the world and how we want the world to perceive us—we focus on how artists influence society through their work. An introductory video on the art offers a global perspective on movements and artists before students choose a genre to study more deeply. In a shared deck of slides, students add their image/artist/year to “claim” their piece of art, which is approved or adapted before moving forward. Students then have time to research the biography of the artist and artwork, and find the perspective of the artwork itself (or something represented within the artwork such as an apple, picnic blanket, or person). Because the unit focuses on representation, students personify the artwork in their one-minute presentations (see Figure 5), telling their classmates about “their artist” and “their home” as well as how they had an impact in their community as the piece of art is projected behind them. While becoming a person in a painting seems straightforward, some students select a movement, dance, or building for a challenge.

**A note for lower levels: At any level, the rich input of art is cause for discussion of how the art impacts the viewer. Novice students can work from a template or anchor chart to create a scaffolded paragraph about what they see in the work, what they like about the work, and what draws it to them.*

Figure 5
Personifying Art Rubric

	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	NY
Content	+ Major events of artist’s life (your creator) + description of message artist is sending + Impact of artist on community/culture	biography of art (you) description of what you represent Impact/influence of art on community/culture	
Language Level	Complex sentences Accurate complex structures Accurately integrates rel pro & negation Connected thoughts	Simple sentences Simple structures Takes risks with rel pro & negation Transition words	
Impact	Rich in detail Engaging Memorized, refers to notes once	Organized Believable Refers to notes often	
Comprehensibility	Easy to understand	Takes a moment to understand	

Student & Teacher Reflections

In allowing choice, autonomy, and creativity to take the stage over grammar and vocabulary, students are motivated to share themselves in these types of authentic presentations. Because of the personal connection, the learning sticks; even students from ten years ago may reminisce about their growth through their *Petit Prince* lesson or how they still chuckle when they see a piece of art that was personified by a friend. These authentic opportunities to engage with language make intercultural communication more realistic for learners, which is the gold standard for why we teach.

For any teachers interested in revising assessments towards more authenticity to “make it stick,” here are some reflection questions:

- How is this topic/task relevant to the world today? What old themes are being challenged?
- How will students be able to form personal connections between the topic/task, language, and their everyday lives?
- How does this topic/task promote connection between other students?
- How are students’ voices and agency incorporated?
- What new perspectives and ideas are introduced through input and how is that incorporated in output?
- How will students grow as a result of this topic/task?

References

- Ausubel, D. P. (1963). *The psychology of meaningful verbal learning*. Grune & Stratton.
- Ausubel, D. P. (2012). *The acquisition and retention of knowledge: A cognitive view*. Springer Netherlands.
- Brown, P.C., Roediger III, H.L., & McDaniel, M.A. (2014). *Make it stick: The science of successful learning*. Belknap Press.
- Champe, P. C., Harvey, R. A., & Ferrier, D. R. (2005). *Biochemistry* (3rd ed.). Lippincott/Williams & Wilkins.
- Feldman, J. (2019). *Grading for equity: What it is, why it matters, and how it can transform schools and classrooms*. Corwin.
- Glisan, E. W., & Donato, R. (2021). *Enacting the work of language instruction: High-leverage teaching practices: Volume 2*. ACTFL.
- McCombs, B. L., & Miller, L. (2007). *Learner-centered classroom practices and assessments: Maximizing student motivation, learning, and achievement*. Corwin Press.
- Novak, K., & Rose, D. H. (2016). *UDL now!: A teacher's guide to applying universal design for learning in today's classrooms*. Cast Professional.
- de Saint-Exupéry, A. (2001). *Le petit prince*. Harcourt, Inc.

Beckie Bray Rankin began her teaching career in 2007 as district coordinator and French teacher at a charter network in Washington, DC after completing undergraduate studies at Boston University (MA). After Beckie completed her MAEd in French Education at Wake Forest University (NC), she spent a year in West Africa leading and teaching French with a humanitarian program. Beckie is currently a French teacher at Lexington High School (MA), where she also coordinates the francophone exchange programs. She serves on boards, publishes, and presents from the local to national scenes, recently receiving ACTFL's Excellence in Teaching for Culture award.

Nikki Prasad is currently a junior at Lexington High School. In school, her favorite subjects are French, English, and history. Nikki started learning French in 6th grade and since then has loved learning and immersing herself in the language. Outside of school, her interests include playing tennis, listening to music, reading, and spending time with family and friends.
