

Notes from Don Buthod

Getting my priorities straight

No matter what we say about the importance of incorporating culture into our courses and getting our students to communicate in the language, all too often we end up falling back on the old tricks. We consider only written proof of linguistic competence (grammar, vocabulary) to assess our students' progress (or their work, or even just their cooperation with us.) In other words, their grades are based on tests and our lessons are designed to prepare them for those tests.

But really, this is backward thinking. Tests at best can only show part of what a student knows or can accomplish. It should not be our goal to design good tests, but rather, our goal should be designing a good course with assessment instruments to accompany it.

Let's consider the course this way:

First, what do we want our students to be able to do?

Second, how do we want them to show that they can do it?

I have come up with a plan to keep myself on track in this regard.

In my courses, I want to concentrate on three areas: linguistic competence, real communication and culture. Other teachers would probably agree with the importance of the three areas, but we usually find it difficult to give them their due consideration in designing lessons and assessing student work. My restructured courses will, I believe, provide me with the guidelines I need to remain true what I believe should make up a language course.

None of this plan should be a secret from the students, of course. I must state at the outset of the course that our work together can be divided into three areas of concentration: linguistic competence, culture and communication, and that the three will have equal weight as far as grading is concerned. Every graded item will be categorized into its area of concentration and that category must be clear at all times to the students.

I think that as a result of clearly stating and abiding by this structure, I can live up to my commitment to emphasize culture and communication to a greater degree, placing them on the same level as linguistic competence.

The following activities I already do with my students are divided into areas of concentration.

Real Communication (1/3 of grade)	Culture (1/3 of grade)	Linguistic Competence (1/3 of grade)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Games • Questions and Answers • Reading • Viewing TV news, documentaries • Websurfing • Writing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Art • Documentaries • Geography • History • Movies • Music • Music videos • Songs • Travel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dictées • Grammar • Pronunciation • Verbfest • Vocabulary

Discussion questions:

How do I assess work in culture and communication?

What changes will this new structure necessitate in my daily work?

What about my old reliable lessons?

What will this do to grades? Will they be higher or lower than previous years?

What about absences and missing work in non-textbook activities?

How does this new structure help or hinder preparation for next-level classes?

If each area is to be worth one-third of the grade, does this mean that my students and I will spend one-third of our class time in each?

Again, the purpose of this restructuring is not to get away from bookwork. It is rather to help guide me to do what I know is right for a complete, thorough language course.