

Teaching Philosophy for Foreign Language Instruction

My mission is to create an inclusive and mutually supportive environment in which students develop not only language and cultural knowledge beyond the textbook, but furthermore hone their awareness of learning strategies and their own strengths.

Part of creating an inclusive and supportive environment is taking stock of the needs of my students. I begin each semester with an informal needs analysis, meeting individually with my students to learn about their goals for the class as well as their general interests. These data points inform how I shape my curriculum. I try to enrich textbook lessons by incorporating materials and tasks that will be useful to each student so that they are motivated to engage with the learning at hand.

In my classroom, language and culture reinforce each other. Students do not merely memorize basic greetings on the first day, but learn that it is common to acknowledge everybody collectively upon walking into a room and that individual greetings often consist of extended formulaic exchanges. This concept is reinforced throughout the year so that students not only practice the language, but also develop a sense of what is broadly considered “normal” across the Arab world. I do not frame my lessons through the four traditional skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening, but rather through the three modes of communication on the interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational levels. This emphasis on communication allows students to see these skills not as end-goals in and of themselves, but as tools through which they can exchange information with the target language and culture.

I have taught extensively from the two integrated-Arabic textbooks, *‘Arabiyyat al-Naas* and *Al-Kitaab*. My familiarity with these curricula allows me to expand teaching beyond the textbook with task-supported activities. Through the performance of real-world tasks, students are motivated to immediately apply their newfound language skills. I see tasks as a critical component of communicative language teaching. Tasks are an effective way to scaffold rich, meaningful input. They not only encourage communication, but furthermore provide opportunities for students to notice gaps in their language as they collaboratively complete the task at hand.

I also believe in cultivating students’ awareness and utilization of learning strategies so that, as they proceed in their studies, they can develop a sense of independence and self-direction. This goal is achieved through the flipped classroom model and through direct instruction and discussion. In the flipped classroom model, homework takes on the role not only of reinforcing old material but also exposing students to new concepts. Class thus becomes our laboratory where new ideas are tested, evaluated, and resynthesized so that students leave ready to apply them to their own needs. I also actively engage students in discussions about learning strategies, asking them to share with their peers while also offering suggestions of my own. This has the dual benefit of not only training students to become more efficient and effective learners, but also fosters in them a sense of their own abilities and expertise.

“Expertise” here is not limited to classroom strategies. I encourage my students to share broadly from their own lives as well. For my heritage students, this might be in the form of recalling the Arabic that they heard growing up and describing in what situation it was used. For true beginners, this could mean discussing connections that they have made between Arabic and their other courses. Our classroom is not based upon the one-way hierarchical transfer of knowledge from teacher down to student, but rather upon creating an inclusive community of learners who are mutually teaching, learning, and growing together.

The assessment tools used in my class support my teaching philosophy goals. Formative assessments are geared toward getting students to indicate not only the knowledge they have acquired from a certain activity, but also what strategies they had utilized in doing so. For example, if a student shares an answer related to a text we have been reading in class (i.e. “I think this is a shopping list”), I will follow up by not only asking the class to evaluate what was said as a form of group engagement, but by also asking the student how they came to that answer (i.e. “the format looks like a list because there are bullet points” or “I didn’t recognize a lot of words, but the ones that I did looked like food items”). This emphasis on metalinguistic awareness encourages students take ownership of their education and to learn from their peers. Formative assessments furthermore inform how I can best organize subsequent classroom activities.

As for summative assessments, they are oriented toward real-life tasks. Examples of summative assessments I have conducted include reading through sample job applications to determine who should be hired (interpretive communication), writing a scholarship application for a study abroad program (presentational communication), and navigating a first date (interpersonal communication). As with formative assessments, the results of summative assessments allow me to dynamically shape my curriculum in response to students’ needs.

My ultimate goal is this: for my students leave the classroom feeling that they have succeeded in communicating their ideas, and step out into the world knowing that they have the cultural knowledge and language strategies to meet any challenge that come their way.