

Applying UDL to Second Language Teaching

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Liz Carter is a visiting Assistant Professor of Chinese Studies at Western Washington University. In her recent publication, “What Does the Post-secondary Mandarin Foreign Language Inclusive Classroom Look Like? The State of the Art and Some Practical Suggestions,” Liz reports her corpus-assisted study on inclusive education and UDL in Mandarin Chinese L2 pedagogy. She also offers practical suggestions to address diverse learning needs in post-secondary Mandarin foreign language classroom. EPIC reached out to Liz, who shared some ideas for moving UDL from theory to practice. See the highlights from the conversation below:

Anxiety in L2 classroom: In her explanation of why UDL matters for L2 learners, Liz points out that language classroom can be especially tricky because there's a certain amount of stress that a student has to experience to learn a second language. "They have to put themselves in a position where they don't know how to express themselves. They have to be willing to make mistakes. I think that one of main ways that UDL can improve language instruction is that you're addressing that student anxiety instead of just saying, well, students signed up for the course so that they should deal with that on their own. There are things that we can do with regards to that stress, and to make language learning a more effective experience."

Liz then explains how instructors can help develop students' confidence using controlled practice activities and contextualized language materials. "For instance, when you introduce a grammatical term, and then have students answer a very specific question, like a 'fill in the blank,' where there's not much room for error, so students build that confidence. Then you have a slightly less structured activity where there's more room for error, but students get to be a little more creative. Once they've got the hang of the grammar point, then you start with more free expression, and there's much more room for error. So it's kind of building up to that free expression in a way that contextualize it for them instead of just kind of teaching them the information. Contextualization in language instruction, especially with things like task-based learning is part of UDL

because some students need that contextualization more than others. They require having those resources. It's providing students with the tools and awareness to decode and to make those decisions about what's an appropriate use of the language on their own. Then they become more autonomous learners, and they're more confident, and they're more likely to feel motivated to keep going."

Varying language levels in L2 classroom: Engaging students in a classroom where learners have varying levels of L2 proficiency can be a challenge for many instructors. In order to help effectively teach combined-level language classes, Liz makes use of jigsaw activities. Jigsaw is a cooperative learning strategy where each student in a group takes responsibility for one piece of a task and shares it with their group to form a complete outcome. Roughly speaking, the jigsaw technique operates in 3 steps:



Image: <https://learningcurrents.weebly.com/the-jigsaw-method.html>

- Assign each student to a homegroup (each homegroup consists of students with varying levels of language skills)
- Create expert groups (each expert group consists of students across home groups), break tasks down into different pieces, and assign the pieces to different expert groups. Each student will then become an expert in his/her topic area.
- Students return to their base groups and share their areas of expertise and complete group tasks together.

Jigsaw activities allow instructors to mix and match students by varying skill level and same skill level. "If I'm just going around in class and I'm asking what did the textbook dialogue say about this and what did the dialogue say about that, then they are all comparing themselves to each other coz they are all doing the exact same thing. But if you have them do different parts of a group activity, they feel they are working together. They are helping each other. They are less likely to feel inferior, and they are more likely to be an active participant". For lower-level students, "they were contributing something the other people didn't have, you know, another piece of the puzzle that was necessary

so they felt more comfortable talking, and being creative, and less like they're directly comparing themselves to someone else."

Teaching non-Roman script in L2 classroom: Learning how to read and write in languages that employ non-Roman scripts is difficult. For languages that use logographic writing systems, this can be especially challenging. In her own Chinese classroom, Liz finds that contextualizing characters and presenting them in a variety of modes enhances students' ability to learn them. "For a vocabulary item, I always include the character, and then an animation of the stroke order, and then a picture to kind of illustrate it so there's that visual association. Sometimes I'll also include a meme. Instead of just including the word, I'll also have a sentence or two where the word is in a context with words and grammar they already know and then have them practice it before we move on to the next word."

In addition to providing different modes of material presentation, she also incorporates technological innovations to teach Chinese characters. "The app-based dictionary Pleco, for example, makes it possible for students to listen to voice-recordings of characters while watching videos of their stroke order. OCR text recognition software can even allow students to scan characters they do not recognize to quickly pull up their definition, pronunciation, and stroke order." With respect to providing multiple means of expression and assessment, Liz mentions that traditional writing assignments are almost exclusively handwritten. Handwriting leads to better character learning, so it has been emphasized in most Chinese language curricula. But it also takes many times longer than typing so perhaps it is not a bad idea to "allow students to submit at least some written assignments and projects digitally if they choose" and by doing so, "instructors would make the classroom more inclusive of those who do not prioritize handwriting ability or have learning disabilities such as dyslexia".

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