

TTLO For Credit Artifacts – Boettcher & Conrad, 2021, Chapters 2 and 7 Daniel Thornhill

Chapter 2

On the topic of the Ten Core Learning Principles (Boettcher & Conrad, 2021), our language program already implements most of them. Principle 2, for example, is the cornerstone of our curriculum development process. We periodically take random cross sections of our student body ($n = 348$ for the last interview) and ask them which of their job tasks require language and how they are using their languages to accomplish them. We also collect accounts of *critical incidents*, anecdotes on how their languages have helped them resolve unexpected, uncomfortable, difficult situations. We then incorporate this information into the curriculum each time it is revised (every three to four years).

Another principle we regularly employ, though with a bit of interpretation, is Principle 4. We view the “concepts” as consisting of functions (e.g., describe in detail, tell a story in the past, summarize, give and defend an opinion) and basic structures (past tense, pre/postpositional phrases, subjects/agents vs. objects/patients) and “course content” as consisting of vocabulary and tasks. The functions and basic structures for each language never vary, but the vocabulary sets and practice tasks we design vary greatly, depending on the results of needs analyses (see above). We strive to allow for personalization of the curriculum and resulting lessons as much as we can, so in this sense, the students do not need to learn *all* the possible content. They must learn the functions and basic structures for their target languages, and then apply those as needed to their specific career fields.

Principle 6 is also foundational to our program. Every course (except the absolute beginner-level) begins with a speaking assessment consisting of a variety of questions targeting each function at a given level (we have Levels 0, 1, 2, and 3) to establish each student’s initial ZPD. Each question deals with a different common topic. Together, the student’s responses give us an idea of their strengths and areas for improvement regarding use of functions, word choice, grammatical accuracy, cultural appropriateness (pragmatics), and fluency (pronunciation, intonation, pausing, and speed). Then, as each course progresses, the students and instructor fill out a rubric at the end of each lesson focusing on these categories (function, word choice, etc.). This data is then wrapped into a weekly progress report, similar in format. This way, we adjust the students’ ZPD continually.

I would need more convincing on Principle 8. I do not see a strict connection between instruction in language and language outcomes. This is perhaps too philosophical, but Principles 2 and 4 seem to conflict with Principle 8. If we allow space for the learners to bring their own personalized and customized knowledge to the table, and we posit that they do not all have to learn the same content, then should we not expect different outcomes, even when all receive the same instruction? Then, if we focus strictly on language learning, we see much evidence suggesting that language learners make connections and produce language they were never taught (Gass & Selinker, 2020)^[1]. Moreover, again focusing on second language acquisition, we also see from the work of Susan Gass, Bill VanPatten, and Diane Larsen-Freeman (among others) the limited effects of explicit instruction on interlanguage and interlanguage’s inherent variability (Gass & Selinker, 2020). Principle 8 should perhaps read, “Expect Different Learning Outcomes, Regardless of Instruction” for language learning.

Principle 9 is one our program still must improve, especially the “*everything else being equal part*.” A great degree of variance in student outcomes was traced back to which teacher they had. Our administrators found that disturbing, but I was not surprised. When one class reaches level 1 after 400 contact hours and another reaches the same level after only 120, that tends to get people’s attention. More time is not always better. Improving the quality of instruction does more for proficiency-oriented programs than throwing more time at them ever will. Do not throw good time after bad; change your game plan. To do this, we have implemented more regular professional development workshops supported by needs analyses.

Principle 10 as well requires attention, particularly the “*our tools shape us*” part. Many of the available tools (online LMS, textbooks, tech tools) rely heavily on reading and writing. Our program, though, focuses on speaking and listening, so we must be careful with respect to which tools to incorporate.

Choosing the wrong tool causes too much focus to shift from speaking to reading and writing. Likewise, many tools focus language practice at the word and phrase level (this is especially common with many apps); our students must be able to converse, however. Incorporating too many exercises with apps and flash cards has caused proficiency levels to *drop* for some of our students in the past. We have begun to take stock of and evaluate the tools our teachers are using to ensure that they serve our purposes. *Caveat utilitor*.

[i] Gass, S.M., and Selinker, L. (2020). *Second Language Acquisition* (5th ed.). New York: Routledge.

Chapter 7

EM Tip 7: Promoting Metacognitive Skills – Activities for Thinking about Thinking (Boettcher and Conrad, 2021, pp.198-201)

Three quarters of the learners in my program have only a high-school education, and in my experience, learners develop their metacognitive skills while engaged in undergraduate university studies. Moreover, my learners have chosen their career fields precisely because they did not enjoy school. This presents a challenge in the language-learning classroom: Many of these learners do not have extensive metacognitive skills. Aside from that, many of the teachers in my program were hired simply because they speak the target languages. Their backgrounds vary greatly. Our teachers of commonly taught languages often (but not always) have education backgrounds. For our less commonly taught languages, however, the teachers may have been chemists, botanists, journalists, taxi drivers, or shopkeepers before coming to us. This means that they may not know precisely (or at all) what metacognition is or how to build it.

Keeping this in mind, we have begun to include metacognitive strategies into our courses, but this is a slow, painstaking process. I plan to propose the think-aloud protocols suggested by under *Determining Existing Metacognitive Skills* (Boettcher & Conrad, p. 195, third bullet). I envision incorporating this type of exercise into the course orientation and then following up with various metacognitive strategies inserted into each lesson (one per lesson).

One strategy we do use already is *Briefings and Debriefings* (Boettcher & Conrad, 2021, p. 196). Too often in the past, the only feedback our learners would receive was “Very good!” or a list of structures they could not correctly form. Then, I came into the picture. Now, we incorporate more useful feedback and formative assessment at the end of each lesson. We even call the lesson-final wrap up a *debrief*. For these debriefs, the teachers lay out the learners’ strengths (what we know), their areas for improvement (what we need to know), and the path forward. This is an invaluable part of formative assessment and lets the learners know exactly where they stand.

EM Tip 13: Assignments for the Evaluating and Creating Levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy (Boettcher and Conrad, 2021, pp. 215-218)

In the past, our lessons (for us a lesson is a two-hour block of instruction) were ineffective. Many of them were constructed around objectives similar to these [my impressions of them are in brackets]:

- Talk about your job. [What about it?]
- Use possessive adjectives while talking about your family. [Why am I talking about my family?]
- Describe a city. [This is far too broad.]
- The daily routine; noun sentences and verb sentences. [A list of daily activities is not useful.]
- Know emotional states, describe characteristics. [For what purpose?]
- Conjugation of verbs in the past, present, future. [This is an entire course, not a lesson.]
- Use vocabulary related to characteristics in sentences. [What does this mean?]
- Security checks at airports [What does this even target?]
- Build questions. [About what?]

So, one change I made when I came to the program was to insist that teachers use our core functions as a start when crafting their objectives and lessons:

- Describe in detail.
- Summarize and report facts.
- Tell a story / anecdote in the past (past narration).
- Explain how something works / is done (present narration).
- Lay out a plan with alternative courses of action (future narration).
- Give detailed instructions or directions.

Then, when combined with relevant topics, we got objectives like these:

- Describe a person of interest in detail for local law enforcement.
- Summarize and report facts on today's developments in the Ukraine war.
- Tell a story / anecdote to build camaraderie with your host-nation partners.
- Explain to your host-nation partner how to write and operations order.
- Lay out a plan with alternative courses of action to avoid a closed bridge on your route.
- Give detailed instructions on assembling your communications system.

This increased focus on function boosted our program's efficacy significantly, raising proficiency outcomes from [ILR 0+ \(Links to an external site.\)](#) after **400 contact hours** (completely unacceptable) to [ILR 1+ \(Links to an external site.\)](#) or [ILR 2 \(Links to an external site.\)](#) over the same time scale.

What is still missing, though, is more practical application. Our learners can produce speech using our core functions, but they still have problems creating and evaluating products in the target languages, which they require for their career fields (medical, veterinary, civil engineering, among others). I envision adding projects to our curriculum so that the learners can take the functions, apply them, and build artifacts that they can then use on the job. I want to bridge the gap between the classroom (virtual or physical) and real life.

EM Tip 17: Using Audio and Video to Create Engaging Learning Experiences (Boettcher and Conrad, 2021, pp. 226-228)

One type of activity we already incorporate involves TED Talks and similar videos. Our learners have significant problems with fluency, which in our context means smooth delivery of language at a normal rate of speed with few unnatural pauses and little stammering. To build up this aspect of language, we have learners select a video that interests them and then select a dense segment. This segment could be 45 seconds to 2 or 3 minutes depending on level. The learners then memorize the segment and act it out, matching the inflection and even the gestures used by the speaker in the video. This has improved their fluency tremendously.

After reading this tip, I want to include more video in the course administration and the delivery of feedback. This will not only build *social presence* (which I mentioned in previous posts as an aspect of our courses that is lacking) but will also serve to build our learners' listening capability. For many of our learners, their courses are their only source for hearing their target languages, so the more exposure they receive to verbal input, the better. Moreover, for more proficient learners, having course announcements delivered verbally in the target languages will encourage them to attend to the language to get the information and give them more practice with our *give detailed instructions* core function.