

Designing the Modern World Language Classroom: How to Guide Students to Proficiency

Megan King

Reviewed by Oriette D'Angelo
The University of Iowa

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Designing the Modern World Language Classroom: How to Guide Students to Proficiency (2022) by Megan King is a book that contributes to the field of language learning by explaining how to incorporate student's voices in the teaching process. Organized into 13 main sections and one "Foreword," "What's next," "An afterword," "Acknowledgments," and "About the author" segments, the book presents itself as a practical guide for teachers, principals, and district leaders, expanding the teaching roles to those in charge of learning environments.

The first section, "Why you need design in your world language classroom," explains how conscious building of a classroom can lead to student success and shows the involvement of instructors in all the steps of the teaching process, carefully creating a way for mutual engagement: "Teachers must design work for their students which has inherent, tangible, and unquestionable value. The study of world language must cultivate an awareness in our students

that knowing people, interacting with people, and being a good communicator are equally as valuable” (p. 11).

Then, “An introduction to the classroom standards and some assumptions” explains how Phil Schlechty’s philosophy and the Schlechty Center create a guide for teachers to understand design as an engagement practice that leads to “assessment,” meaning an “evaluation of progress towards goals” (p. 13). Phil Schlechty was a leader in education who founded the Schlechty Center, a non-profit organization that promotes teaching practices and offers advice for schools and school districts. By explaining tenets such as working without fear of punishment, working with authenticity, and working towards products or performances, the chapter offers a compelling argument about the importance of giving students responsibilities to participate in the classroom.

The third section starts explaining these tenets, being the first one “Protection from adverse consequences for initial failures.” This section explores how frustration towards language learning could harm the process, both for students and teachers. King offers a possible solution to avoid this outcome, explaining that “as a teacher develops knowledge in her students, she integrates formative tasks and assessments to give students feedback that helps them grow towards proficiency” (p. 19). According to King, designing a safe space where mistakes are welcome enhances a proactive and positive response from students, relieving frustration and improving both the teaching and learning process.

Then, “Authenticity” is defined as “learning materials that are artifacts of life in the target language” (p. 29). King proposes that, while designing classes for students, the goal is to consider student’s needs, motivations, and purposes for them to be engaged in the language learning practice.

The fifth section, “Choice,” explores how giving responsibility to students enhances their involvement. King argues that “in world language we [teachers] have more liberty than most precisely because our standards relate to proficiency” (p. 37). This means that students need to have some space and control to make critical choices to dictate what could be useful for them. Moreover, “Product focus” explains how proficiency is key while designing a world language class: “Learning a foreign language is entirely about performance because without using language proficiently, communication cannot happen” (p. 47). In this sense, the work of a teacher is designing a class that leads to communication as an ideal outcome.

The seventh section, “Clear and compelling standards + assessment,” explains how students expect mastery from teachers, and how this expectation leads to success in their learning process. In this sense, assessment tools are crucial to valuing student’s progress. King argues that teachers need to be aware of the evolution of teaching trends to keep themselves updated and to incorporate those innovations into their teaching.

“Content and substance” states that content needs to be engaging for students so that they can avoid losing interest in the language learning practice: “If we (students and teachers) are truly going to achieve a quality result, we have to connect learners to rich, relevant, contextualized content and then empower them to use it” (p. 72).

The ninth section, “Organization of knowledge,” argues that “In world languages, we’ll refer to knowledge in terms of proficiency because it represents the degree to which a student can use information” (p. 73). King states that it is crucial for language instructors to organize classes by thematic units to present information in a condensed way. In this sense, knowledge must be accessible at different levels to enhance comprehension and facilitate student goals.

Moreover, in the section “Affirmation,” King proposes that a sense of community improves the language learning process and allows students to connect with different audiences. The section emphasizes the possibilities of the internet (with blogs and forums, among other platforms) to engage with broader audiences as well.

The next section, “Affiliation,” emphasizes the independence that students must have in the classroom. These practices give students agency to be in charge of different tasks around the learning environment, promoting self-reliance in a collaborative form.

The twelfth section, “Novelty and variety,” states that is important for instructors to be aware of new trends to incorporate them in class. This tenet also considers what is new for students and enhances their engagement in the language learning course.

Section “Engagement” emphasizes that students who are involved in the classroom have the opportunity to ask questions and encourage teachers to ask questions to them as well, helping teachers to create a community that considers students’ needs.

Then, “An afterword: implications for digital learning” explores how COVID-19 and its aftermath highlighted the importance of creating digital spaces for both teachers and students, emphasizing how designing these digital spaces is equally important as designing face-to-face instructions, also considering the pace in which students are going to learn.

This book is a crucial contribution for world language instructors who are looking to improve their teaching practices, considering both teachers’ and students’ involvement in the classroom in order to create a participatory learning process, thus giving everyone a sense of community and enhancing students’ participation. Megan King presents information clearly and concisely, and the book’s structure condenses important principles for instructors to improve their teaching while always considering students’ needs.

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