Attending to Learner Diversity in the Lesson Plan: Planning for Intensity of Engagement

Benjamin Rifkin, *Temple University*

Research on foreign language learning outcomes (Brecht, Davidson and Ginsberg, 1993; Carroll, 1967; Davidson, 1998, 2002, 2003; Magnan, 1986; Rifkin, 2005; Thompson, 1996; and Tschirner, 1996) has shown that time on task is an essential ingredient for successful foreign language learning. This is not to say that other factors are not also important for successful foreign language learning, but rather to say that even when all other factors (motivated learners, qualified teachers, sound learning materials) are in place, foreign language learning, understood as the mastery of interpretive skills of listening and reading, interpersonal and presentational skills of reading and writing, is impossible *without sufficient time on task*. American culture is permeated with evidence of the myths of language learning against which language and culture teachers must struggle:

- Buy our CD-ROMs and in 24 hours you'll speak Italian like a diplomat!
- Learn French naturally with our CD-ROM immersion!
- Learn German in your car!
- I'm going to Mexico on a 3-week vacation immersion to pick up Spanish.
- I'm going to listen to the tapes on the plane so I'm ready for Tokyo.

These, and many other similar expressions of personal intent (to "pick up" a language) and commercial purpose (to sell a language learning product), implying that language learning requires neither time nor effort on the part of the learner, fly in the face of what most Americans know to be true with regard to other skills, such as learning to play the piano, fix a car, or score a touchdown, skills that require a great deal of practice. After all, when asked how to get to Carnegie Hall, many Americans know that the answer is: "Practice, practice, practice!" The extraordinary importance

Benjamin Rifkin (Ph.D., University of Michigan) is Professor of Slavic Languages and Vice Dean for Undergraduate Affairs in the Temple University College of the Liberal Arts. Rifkin is an ACTFL-certified OPI Tester and Trainer in Russian. He served as the director of the Middlebury Russian School from 1999-2003. His research in applied linguistics, second language acquisition, and foreign language education has been published in the *ADFL Bulletin, Foreign Language Annals, Language Learning, The Modern Language Journal,* and the *Slavic and East European Journal*. Rifkin is the author of an intermediate Russian-language textbook, *Grammatika v kontekste* (McGraw-Hill), and a web-based manual for introductory Russian, *START: An Introduction to the Sound and Writing Systems of Russian* (Focus Publishers). His most recent projects include the web-based Russian Advanced Interactive Listening Series (at the University of Wisconsin-Madison) and a textbook (written with Olga Kagan and Anna Yatsenko), *Advanced Russian through History* (Yale University Press).

of time on task in the foreign language curriculum, time in the classroom to practice using the language, is severely constrained by the place of foreign language in the P-16 curriculum. Many school districts do not accord foreign language study the same kind of attention in the curriculum as that provided mathematics or science, thereby depriving foreign language students of daily exposure to foreign language in use. Many post-secondary institutions assign foreign language classes, even introductory classes in the most challenging foreign languages (such as Arabic or Chinese), only three hours per week, because that is consistent with offerings in environmental studies, philosophy or sociology. The problem in both contexts is compounded when three or four hours of class meetings a week are concentrated in just two sessions for reasons whether due to needs of the administration (block scheduling) or the personnel (half-time teacher coming in only two days a week). While foreign language instructors at any level can hope to find and procure funding for new instructional materials, improve classroom activities, acquire new listening and reading texts, invite native speakers to class or take students on field trips to community centers and cultural events, on the whole we are largely powerless to increase the amount of instructional time we are given. There are certainly instances in which programs are enhanced with an extra class hour per week, but we are all constrained by the fact that our students move from pre-school to kindergarten in one or two years' time, from elementary to middle school in five years' time, from middle to high school in three years' time, from high school, we hope, on to college in four years' time, and in another few years, they leave the college curriculum as well. In each of these instructional contexts, foreign language is but a component of a larger educational mission; unlike the European model of higher education, there are very few, if any, educational contexts in the United States where learners are able to focus exclusively on foreign language studies without also completing requirements typical of the American liberal arts educational mission. Generally speaking, the American liberal arts paradigm is extraordinarily successful in training for critical thinking; this curricular pattern brings to the foreign language classroom students who might otherwise have never joined us. These students, in most contexts, constitute the majority of our learners: they enrich our classrooms with the diversity of their backgrounds, experiences, aptitudes, and purposes. Many may not have the desire to attain high levels of proficiency, but some who lack that interest at the outset may become "infected" with foreign language learning zeal. Those who resist that infection still exit our programs with significant cultural learning and some communicative skills and learning experiences that, no doubt, help them navigate their educational and career paths with greater success. Rifkin (2005) has shown that students learning Russian encounter a ceiling at the intermediate mid or high levels: after even more than 600 hours of classroom instruction, students are unable to attain higher levels of proficiency in Russian without an immersion experience, whether in the United States (e.g., Middlebury Russian School) or on study abroad in a Russophone cultural environment (e.g., Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and so forth). Rifkin's findings are consistent with other studies in French (Magnan, 1986), German (Tschirner, 1996), and Russian (Thompson, 1996; Davidson, 1998, 2002, 2003), and are confirmed also for Spanish (Liskin-Gasparro,

2005, personal communication). Given that we cannot seem to budge the needle of the proficiency "meter" beyond the intermediate mid level without immersion instruction, we must reconsider the nature of classroom instruction to see if we can give it whatever "boost" is required to engage students more deeply in foreign language learning. Such a "boost," an increase in the intensity of student engagement in the foreign language classroom, would have two potential consequences:

(1) students more intensely engaged in foreign language learning may be more likely to seek additional learning experiences, including immersion experiences, thus extending their language learning beyond the sequence of their current program;

(2) students more intensely engaged in foreign language learning may be more likely to attain higher proficiency levels, greater cultural competence, greater self-confidence, and improved study habits and language processing strategies. Although Rifkin's findings contradict those of Carroll (1967), Rifkin argues that Carroll's results are not reliable (Rifkin, 2005). In the course of three decades three authors of different studies of foreign language lesson planning (Knop, 1983; James, 1993; Rifkin, 2003) have argued that the ideal foreign language lesson has several phases which may be summed up thusly:

1. **Overview or Preview:** Brief statement of lesson purpose and agenda

2. **Prime, Preparation, or Review:** Review of previous work related to the current lesson, reminding students of material or skills they will need for the current lesson

3. **Presentation and Drill:** Presentation of new material and teacher fronted drill

4. **Practice:** Learner-centered practice with new material

5. **Prove, Check or Accountability Phase:** Demonstration, by students, of mastery of new language material

Rifkin (2003) calls for a sixth phase for follow-up and extension activities as well as explicit discussion of strategy use.

These foreign language lesson models are all fine in the abstract, but together they lack attention to what is arguably the most important factor in the language learning dynamic: the learner him- or herself. Each learner is different: each learner comes to the learning process with a different set of background experiences, aptitudes, intelligences, interests and purposes. The established models for foreign language lesson planning do not accommodate the diversity of learners in our classrooms. When, in a typical classroom (whether in a foreign language or other discipline), the instructor asks students questions, calling on one student at a time to answer each question, providing feedback to each student in turn, an interaction pattern in which the instructor's voice dominates is established (see figure 1). This interaction pattern provides an opportunity for the instructor to mediate every learner contribution to class discussion; indeed, the instructor's voice is heard in one out of every two speech turns. Students in this kind of classroom learn quickly that they need not pay very much attention to classroom discourse because they are likely to be called upon to contribution to that discourse only once every $2n$ turns, where n = the number of students in the class. Fifty percent or more of

the discourse in the classroom is taken up by teacher talk; the remaining speaking turns are divided up, whether equitably or inequitably, among the students, who may not be engaged in listening or responding to the comments made by their peers. This kind of classroom is one that we shall classify as featuring low intensity of engagement, for the purposes of this argument, because students are not intensely engaged in the classroom discourse. There is a time and a place for this kind of interaction pattern in every classroom setting. Just as Arens, Morgan and Swaffar have argued in their study of classroom activities in classes taught by teachers espousing communicative language teaching (Swaffar, Arens, Morgan, 1982), the implementation of a single translation activity does not mean that a class is not communicatively focused, rather it is the importance on translation as an activity within the larger context of other activities that determines whether the instructor is practicing communicative language teaching. So, too, the use of teacher-fronted instruction from time to time does not mean that a class, on the whole, is not learner-centered; the importance, frequency and priority of teacher fronted activities must be considered in the larger context of classroom instruction. That being said, it is essential to bring the learner into the lesson planning process as a factor to be considered at all stages of instruction. Teachers should explicitly identify learning objectives (stage 1 in Knop's, James's, and Rifkin's model lesson plans), prepare learners for instruction (stage 2), present and drill new material (stage 3), provide students with opportunities to practice using material (stage 4), and require students to demonstrate mastery (stage 5), but they should also plan for the role of every participant in the learning process at every stage of the lesson. When two students do a pair activity (practice, stage 4), and later report back to the larger class (accountability, stage 5), what are the other students expected to do when these two students are reporting back? If they are expected to listen, what makes them accountable for or engaged by that listening?

Teachers should extend their planning to build into their lessons activities which require intensity of engagement, activities which require *every learner* to actively engage in language use, whether receptively or productively, *for the entire language lesson.* If students are working hard in a foreign language classroom characterized by a high level of intensity of engagement, students should leave the classroom feeling tired from the cognitive efforts of language use and active language learning. In a high intensity of engagement classroom, when one learner performs, all other learners are held accountable for processing the language used in that learner's performance. This principle will be illustrated below with pairs of classroom learning scenarios illustrating first low, then high intensity of engagement. Each pair of scenarios integrates different combinations of language modalities, some with grammar study.

1a: Listening and Presentational Speaking. The class listens as learners, one at a time, make brief presentations on the topic of housing (including homelessness and gentrification) in the target culture. While one student talks, the others should be listening, but are dazing off into space. Students whom we believe to be listening (or students who are pretending to listen) are not held accountable for the content of student presentations.

1b: Presentational Speaking, Interpersonal Speaking, Listening, and Writing. Learners listen in pre-assigned groups as members of another group pres-

ent, in turn, on the topic of housing (including homelessness and gentrification) in the target culture. Groups draw plans for apartments, homes, apartment buildings or housing projects; these plans are presented as illustrations for group presentations. Each group brainstorms questions (and writes them down) for the presenter and objections to the presenter's report in preparation for a debate between the groups. Groups debate on assigned topics, using notes from questions and images (plans) from pre-debate presentations.

2a: Culture, Reading, and Listening. Learners read the lyrics to a song in the target culture: the text of the lyrics is incomplete. Students complete the text by listening to the song and filling in the missing words. After students have completed the text, they answer comprehension questions (either working individually or in groups). When students do not identify cultural background or bias in the text, the teacher lectures to the class to cover the important points of the text. Some students pay attention to the lecture, others do not.

2b: Culture, Listening, Reading, Interactive Speaking, and Writing. Learners working in groups read the lyrics to at least two different songs, on a similar or related topic in the target culture: each group has a different song. The text of the lyrics for each song is incomplete: students in each group complete the text by listening to the song and filling in the missing words. Each group learns its assigned song and performs it, singing along with the CD or cassette, teaching the song to other students in the class. Students who play a musical instrument are encouraged to learn to perform the song on their instrument. Each group becomes an expert on its own song. After all the groups have presented their songs, students discuss the differences among the songs that treat a similar topic or theme. Groups brainstorm their ideas and put their analyses on the board for larger class analysis and discussion.

3a: Listening and Interpersonal Speaking. In an all-class discussion of hobbies and interests, three students dominate the conversation. Each of these three students addresses the teacher directly, ignoring other students in the class, when s/he is talking.

3b: Listening, Writing, and Interpersonal Speaking. Students work in groups to create a survey about hobbies and interests. The teacher checks the surveys for accuracy. In the next class meeting, students mingle with one another and survey each other, then report back to their groups to analyze the data and create group presentations. As groups make their presentations, all students are asked to compare data and consider survey bias, taking notes on the data and conclusions presented by each group. The class concludes with a larger discussion of cultural patterns.

4a: Listening. Students listen to a teacher's presentation on the geography of the target culture and answer comprehension questions as the teacher poses each question to an individual student in the class.

4b: Listening, Reading, and Presentational Speaking. The teacher gives students a list of questions about the target culture's geography and a list of target-culture web search engines. The students come back to class the next day with notes and print-outs of information from websites, and work together in groups to create

Powerpoint presentations on one or more aspects of the target culture's geography, based on the information they found on the web. Each group also creates two quiz questions based on their presentation. After each group presents, the teacher administers a quiz consisting of questions based on each presentation.

5a: Reading. Students read a short story and come to class for discussion of the text. The teacher asks a few questions; students respond that they do not know or with one-word answers. The teacher lectures and students doodle.

5b: Reading and Interpersonal Speaking. Students read a short story and come to class assigned to retell the story from the point of view of another character in the story or another character in another story. Students retell the story to one another in pairs; each successive retelling must be longer, embellished with more detail, than the previous one. Students are encouraged to include scenes imagined, but not depicted in the text they read. The groups come together for a whole-class discussion of the question, "How would the story have been different if one of the characters had been American?"

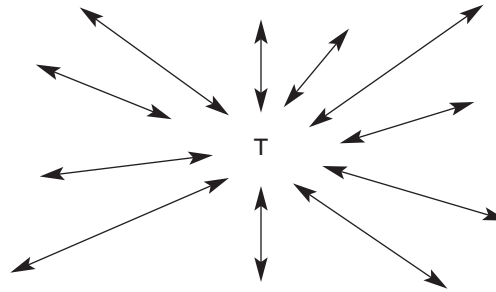
6a: Writing. Students write an essay and hand it in for the teacher to grade. The student writes for an audience of one.

6b: Writing. Students complete a multi-phase, process-focused collaborative writing assignment with a public presentation of their writing (publication in class magazine) and discussion. Students work with a reading or listening stimulus to start the writing process, work with a partner to write topic sentences, compare essays written at home with their partner, combine the two different essays into one best effort. Students work with partners to create an illustration for each story. Different pairs of students work together to edit their compositions. Final papers are published in a class magazine. (See, for example, Magnan, 1985.)

7a: Culture and Reading. Students read a text about the design of an important architectural landmark in the target culture and answer comprehension questions in class.

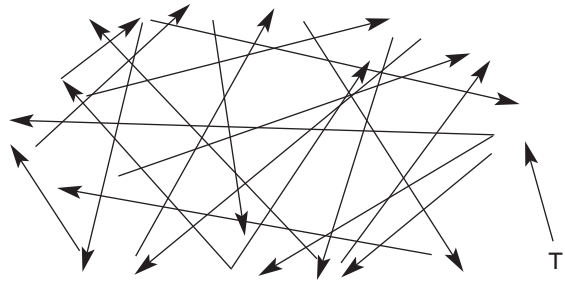
7b: Culture, Reading, Listening and Interpersonal Speaking: Students are separated into groups; each group is given images of an important (but different) architectural landmark from the target culture. Students work in pairs: each pair consists of two students from different groups. Students, working in pairs, coach each other to build (using clay or popsicle sticks) a model of the architectural landmark: one student describes the landmark for which s/he has seen images, while the other tries to build something that corresponds to that same description. After the various models have been constructed, students come together to discuss how this process helps them appreciate the aesthetic qualities of the various landmarks. They then work in groups to brainstorm questions they would like to answer about these landmarks and their importance for the target culture. Analyzing the several different pairs of learning activities listed above, one can see a clear trend: the first proposed activity of each pair of activities consists of a traditional, teacher-fronted activity

Figure 1



Key to Figure 1: Every arrow indicates a spoken utterance addressed to a student (not marked) or to the teacher (marked T). The teacher is the addressee or source of every utterance.

Figure 2



Key to Figure 2: Every arrow indicates a student (not marked) or teacher (T) utterance. The arrow points to the utterance's addressee. There is the same number of utterances in Figure 2 as in Figure 1. However, in Figure 1 every student utterance is elicited by a teacher utterance and every student utterance is addressed to the teacher; in figure 2 each student utterance elicits a response from another student. There are, therefore, twice as many lines in Figure 2 as in Figure 1 because each student utterance elicits a response from another student, not from the teacher.

focusing on one kind of learner intelligence, namely verbal and linguistic intelligence (as defined by Gardner, 1983), while the second proposed activity of each pair of activities brings other intelligences in to the learning and teaching process. In activity 1b, students use visual and spatial skills to draw housing plans, while in activity 2b, students use their musical and rhythmic intelligence to learn and perform a song, later to teach it to their classmates. In activity 3b, students use logical/mathematical intelligence to analyze quantitative data from a survey and to create presentations based on these data, while in activity 4b students use interpersonal intelligence as well as visual and spatial skills to integrate different sources of information (found by the different students in the group) into a single Powerpoint presentation. Students use interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence to understand character perspective in activity 5b, whereas in activity 6b students use these skills and visual intelligence to develop collaborative essays and illustrations for these essays. Finally, activity 7b features bodily/kinesthetic intelligence as well as visual/ spatial intelligence.

Of course not every student has strengths in all these different intelligences, but students strong in one area can help their classmates in that area. This kind of arrangement helps all students develop self-esteem and confidence that they can use their language skills successfully. Varying the focus of classroom activities in this way helps teachers "differentiate instruction" by providing multiple modes for teaching and learning, as described by Donato in *Valuing Diversity in Learners:* "Not all learners will be served in the same way: learners have multiple pathways to learning" (American Councils, 2004). When teachers provide a variety of different approaches to learning to communicate in a foreign language, more learners, and learners from more diverse backgrounds, are able to participate in and benefit from language instruction. In the first of each pair of activities the teacher is more the "sage on the stage," dominating classroom discourse; in the second, the teacher as "guide on the side" facilitates and encourages student interactions without dominating them. Indeed, a diagram of the interaction patterns of the second of each of the pairs of activities shows a web of interactions in which the students interact intensively with one another (Figure 2), having more speaking turns because the teacher does not mediate every student contribution to the classroom discussion. It is possible to intensify the engagement of learners in the group activities described above in the second of each of the pairs of activities by carefully planning the student composition of each group and assigning roles to students within each group. Students can be divided into groups randomly (all those wearing red shirts, blue shirts, green shirts, for example), or by some design. If by design, for example, students reluctant to speak can be grouped together so that they cannot take the easy path of letting loquacious peers dominate in mixed groups. Teachers can group students by performance on an assignment, making sure that each group has a range of students with different performance profiles. Within groups, students can assign students different roles, giving a heritage student, for example, the task of providing lexicon as needed, while asking a student who tends to score well on grammar quizzes the responsibility of checking the grammar in his or her peers' group writing task. Different roles assigned could include: time monitor (check to make sure task is accomplished within time allotted), moderator (make sure that everyone gets a chance to contribute his or her ideas), vocabulary and/or grammar checker (compare written work with material in a textbook or dictionary), illustrator, distributor/collector of materials, media specialist (collect photographs, music, or video clips and integrate them into the presentation), and others. The judicious assignment of group task roles can help engage students on the basis of their special strengths, their unique combinations of intelligences, learning interests, and learning purposes. Providing for a variety of language learning activities, teachers attend to the learning needs of diverse learners, whether the diversity comes from:

- Heritage learners with different kinds of family language background (e.g., some with and some without formal schooling in the language)
- Gifted students
- Students with learning disabilities
- Students with physical or emotional disabilities

- Students at different levels of instruction in the same class (e.g., levels 3 and 4 in the same class session)

As Abbott noted (American Councils, 2004), "If there are 30 different learners in the classroom, there are 30 different places they are at in their language development." By planning for different kinds of learning activities that require different kinds of intelligence, teachers will be able to engage more of their learners in successful language learning. Barr-Harrison and Daugherty wrote, "… if one uses a variety of activities and multisensory approaches in teaching, one can reach most learners by encouraging their cooperativeness and addressing the particular learning difficulties that some students have in foreign language classrooms" (Barr-Harrison and Daugherty: 86). Heritage learners, for example, can be paired with traditional foreign language learners in an exercise designed to give each student a sense of his or her own expertise. Just as a heritage learner helps a foreign language learner with vocabulary for a particular exercise, so the foreign language learner can help the heritage learner with spelling (or in some cases, at a more basic level, with writing). The collaboration teaches both partners that the skills and background they bring to the language learning process are both valued contributions, even if neither is complete. The knowledge of the foreign language learner may help instill in the heritage learner the drive to continue to improve his or her skills to communicate both in speech *and* in writing in the target language, while the knowledge of the heritage learner instills in the foreign language learner the desire to acquire more vocabulary. In order to design and implement appropriate classroom activities for any class, instructors must, as suggested by Pope Bennett (American Councils, 2004), conduct class surveys to learn about their students' language backgrounds, learning styles, perceived areas of strength and weakness (multiple intelligences), learning purposes, and career interests and goals. This information is critically important for the instructor's understanding of his or her own class. Having such information in hand, instructors then must set about planning activities carefully, matching the multiple intelligences reflected in their classes with learning activities, making sure that every learner is accommodated. Throughout this process, instructors must be careful to consider the role of the learner in every activity presented in the class: at every moment, every learner should be engaged; there should be a role for every learner throughout the lesson; every learner should be held accountable for processing language (meaning) throughout each lesson. In the process of planning these activities, teachers should not be too focused on summative assessments and not let summative assessment drive the lesson plan. Too often, concerns about summative assessment prevent teachers from introducing pair or group activities into their classroom because such activities may prove to be a challenging framework for the assignment of individual grades. If, instead, teachers concentrate on promoting student learning, the role of pair and group work will be paramount; there is time for individually focused summative assessments at regular intervals, as appropriate. Marjorie Hall Haley observed, "Planning is the pivotal point for accommodating diverse learners" (American Councils, 2004). The planning of learning activities characterized by high intensity of engagement is surely a challenging task and may seem burdensome to teachers as

they begin the process. However, with time, this kind of planning becomes "second nature" and teachers will find that it gets easier and easier because the same frameworks can be recycled with different language content. The most important incentive, however, for developing this "planning habit" is the success of *all our learners*, in all their splendid diversity.

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