

Organizing Principles for New Language Teacher Educators: The Methods Course

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Abstract

For those new language teacher educators who find themselves daunted by the challenge of what to do with their language methods courses, this article provides an overview of research-based instructional choices and practices that will orient the new professional. The organizing principles offer language teacher educators a thoughtful, experience-based approach as well as sets of technique and activity resources for use in their first methods course and beyond.

Introduction

In Schulz's review of the nearly century-long body of literature on foreign language teacher preparation, she is disappointed to find little significant advancement in the area of language teacher education and this leads her to conclude that, "[w]e are still discussing many of the same issues that were discussed more than 80 years ago, and we still have not found solutions to many of the problems that plague the development of FL teachers" (2000, p. 516). Effective teaching practice, one of the problems Schulz highlights, is a challenge for language teacher educators (LTEs) and is particularly critical during the first year(s) of teaching language methods courses.

Initial challenges to a new language teacher educator may include a lack of specific guidelines for language teacher preparation (Freeman, 1989; Freeman &

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Johnson, 1998; Vélez-Rendón, 2002; Wilbur, 2007) and a lack of curricular resources (Bernhardt & Hammadou, 1987). Planning and teaching a methods course can be very intimidating as there are few (if any) courses on “How to teach a methods course”

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available in graduate programs. Accredited institutions adhere to established program criteria (such as the NCATE standards) but these criteria are not a blueprint for designing a methods course start to finish. The LTE, then, is responsible for synthesizing previous coursework, experience, required accreditation criteria, and the current literature in order to create a methods course without the benefit of an overarching model.

The task of preparing future language teachers may be further complicated because many new LTEs have no secondary classroom experience while others have not been in a secondary classroom for some time (Wilbur, 2007). According to Wilbur’s investigation of foreign language methods classrooms, her respondents “underscored the connection between secondary classroom experience and successful methods instruction” (2007, p. 82). The disconnect between the methods course and the context of the current secondary classroom is a second challenge to many new LTEs.

We faced these challenges during our first years teaching methods courses in a thriving language teacher education program. The sense of being adrift in the sea of language teaching methods, practices, and techniques without an overarching framework is precisely what led us to this conversation. Through our dialogues, we found we were not alone and that others were having similar discussions.

We therefore pose the following question, “Without clear guidelines, how do we, instructors of varying backgrounds and experience levels, come to a general consensus to plan and implement a language methods course?” Our hope is that this article promotes further dialogue among novice and experienced LTEs and that the resources provided establish a basis for reflection and argument. The principles are not intended to be prescriptions about how to teach a methods course, but rather a point of departure for further discussion among language educators regarding methods courses.

Our Instructional Context

Our programs prepare undergraduate students for elementary, middle level, and high school classrooms in French, German, Spanish, the Teaching of English to Speakers of other Languages (TESOL), and Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). The TESOL/TEFL and foreign language (FL) students are required to take a second language acquisition theory course and a middle/high school methods course (TESOL/TEFL or FL). Depending on the student’s major/minor, the student may also be required to take an elementary methods FL course, a content-based TESOL course, a language assessment course, or an ESL/EFL practicum. Most of this coursework must be completed prior to the student’s official student teaching. The cycle of coursework is designed to emphasize reflection and decision making in teaching so that students develop essential knowledge and skills before entering the student teaching semester.

Constructivist roots are the foundation of our methods courses which to us means that students will co-construct their knowledge in conjunction with their class peers, the texts' authors, and the instructor. We strive to create a classroom environment that mirrors the approaches, activities, techniques, and practices of an interactive and engaging language classroom (i.e., ESL, EFL or FL). Therefore, an observer in these classes would notice small group work, interaction among learners, open-ended questioning, critical analysis, and various types of assessments (e.g., mock job interviews or online portfolios). The syllabi, course textbooks, and assessments vary among our FL and TESOL/TEFL methods courses, however, the courses share a common vision of organizing principles. These core principles inform our direction in methods courses from planning to instruction.

Planning and Resources

We begin planning a methods course by asking ourselves essential questions that every language teacher should be able to answer: “What does it mean to be proficient in a language?” “Why should languages be studied?” “How do we assess language?” These questions (among others) are a good starting point and they potentially form a centerpiece for the course as the preservice teachers (PSTs) address them throughout the semester. PSTs can also participate by brainstorming their own essential questions about the field the first day of class. Wiggins & McTighe (2005) argue that essential questions help the teacher and students focus on those ideas of greater importance and relevance throughout the course.

We also refer to the INTASC Standards for Foreign Language Teachers (2002) and the ACTFL/NCATE Program Standards for the Preparation of Foreign Language Teachers (2002) in the development of our methods course. The INTASC Standards outline what foreign language teachers should know and be able to do in the first years of their language career, while the ACTFL/ NCATE Standards provide a guide for L2 teacher preparation programs. In addition, PSTs will need to be familiar with the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* (2006) to create their future curriculum and lessons to help K-12 students achieve greater proficiency in the target language. All of these sets of standards inform content selection in a methods course.

Methods textbooks are another resource for class planning. Common themes through many of the popular methods texts (e.g., Brown, 2007; Hall, 2002; Lightbown & Spada, 2003; Omaggio Hadley, 2001; Shrum & Glisan, 2005) include the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* (2006), ACTFL proficiency guidelines in speaking (2000) and writing (2001), teaching and integrating the “four skills,” among other essential ideas. State foreign language standards (e.g., Wisconsin’s Planning Curriculum for World Language, 2002), as well as professional development opportunities at regional and national conferences, provide additional input.

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Further resources for planning methods courses include a database of methods syllabi available on the FLTEACH website (<http://www.cortland.edu/FLTEACH/flteach-anc.html>) and some limited research on methods syllabi. Wilbur (2007) analyzed 32 methods course syllabi for common course objectives, assignments, and evaluation systems, building on earlier FL syllabi research by Über Grosse (1993). In a different light, Byrd (2007) examined twenty different methods syllabi for elements related to the teaching of culture. His dissertation details specific cultural assignments, evaluations, and objectives defined in language course syllabi. This research provides a glimpse into shared requirements and evaluations related to cultural learning by analyzing commonalities among methods syllabi.

A language teacher education course, informed by the aforementioned resources, provides a framework in which LTEs can determine what content they will include. The next question, then, is how to effectively prepare the PSTs during the methods course. The following six organizing principles may provide a basis for consideration in planning and teaching methods courses.

One: Focus on integrating constructivist foundations with guided instruction.

During our first year of teaching methods, we worked to find the balance between giving too much information or providing too little. With a more transmission-oriented instructional approach, learners may find it challenging to make long-term cognitive connections with the information being taught and to transfer this knowledge from theory to practice (Hedgcock, 2002; Musumeci, 1997). A constructivist learning environment may allow students the freedom to construct their own knowledge, however, without simultaneous teacher guidance, students may not yet have the depth of understanding necessary to fully grasp the concepts or practical applications (Kirschner, Sweller, Clark, 2006; O'Dwyer, 2006). We found that the appropriate insertion of examples tied to prior knowledge is the key to effectively maintaining the balance between teacher-centeredness and the pure constructivist classroom (see Table 1 for more ideas).

For example, in one of our teaching methods courses, there is a lesson designed to better understand the concept of performance assessment. The lesson uses an inductive approach in which the learners construct knowledge rather than being directly told the characteristics of performance assessment and the differences from traditional testing. During the lesson, we ask the students to brainstorm examples of performance assessments outside of the language classroom. If the class struggles with this task, we guide them by providing an example of a performance assessment—the road test for obtaining a driver's license.

The driver's license example activates background knowledge and connects to our PSTs' experiences. When we structure learning activities to activate prior knowledge, this allows learners to use what they already know in new contexts (Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning, 2000). According to Freeman and Johnson (1998), "we as teacher educators now acknowledge that prior knowledge is a powerful factor in teacher learning in its own right..." (p. 401). PSTs' experiences and voices are an integral component to teacher development (Kumaravadivelu, 2001; Freeman,

2002). The insertion of examples tied to prior knowledge facilitates students' construction of knowledge, one goal of our constructivist-grounded classrooms.

Table 1: Focus on integrating constructivist foundations with guided instruction

Quick tips for implementation

- Use various cooperative grouping strategies to foster student collaboration. For example, random groups may be formed based on students' favorite colors, preferred travel destinations, or common clothing.
- Allow longer pauses after questions giving students more opportunity to respond or ask them to free write on a topic prior to discussing it as a whole class.
- If students struggle to respond during class discussion, do not resort to transmission instruction. Instead, break them into small groups, restate the question, and have them formulate possible answers and refer to the texts to assist in idea generation or to support their ideas.
- Use various techniques for activating prior knowledge such as word associations, free recall, recognition, and gestures.

Two: Model effective practice.

When we present activities and techniques in our methods courses, we not only explain the how and the why but we also demonstrate these techniques ourselves.

As Wing admonishes us, "In our methodology courses, teacher educators must practice what we preach" (1993, p. 172). What we did not fully appreciate in our first years was that modeling includes both the explicit teaching of instructional strategies as well as the unspoken choices made by the teacher.

We learned quickly that developing preservice teachers' understanding of practice requires modeling in part because of their influences of previous instructional experiences (Johnson, 1994; Vélez-Rendón, 2002). As observers in the classroom, "students are shown a lot about what teachers do but almost nothing about why they do it" (Schrier, 2008, p. 290). The learner needs to be made aware of teacher choices (Freeman, 1989; Woodward, 2003). While teaching, we can temporarily halt the class to help students notice particular choices we are making at that moment. For example, when we present a long list of characteristics of the "good" language learner, we ask the students to rank their top three choices. After the task, we stop the class and share with them why a ranking activity was selected for a long list of information. As an extension, we sometimes ask the PSTs to generate ideas on how a long list activity could be designed to be engaging and meaningful to their future language students. For example, we might share with our PSTs that when learning long lists of vocabulary, such as food items, a language teacher could ask students to rank their top five favorite and least favorite

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foods to compare with a partner (see Table 2 on for more ideas). Woodward (2003) discusses the importance of including PSTs “in a detailed and very useful discussion of the steps, materials, content, and participant experience from the inside out” (p. 303). When we share our conversation, we recognize students as equal participants in the instructional dialogue.

In summary, the decision to share a rationale is more than a fleeting statement. It is an instructional conversation between the educator and the learners about teaching and learning (Vygotsky, 1979). Raising learner awareness about the thoughts that influence instructional choices is a component of the language teacher knowledge base (Freeman and Johnson, 1998). Communicating the reasoning behind our actions is important for both PSTs and LTEs.

Table 2: Model effective practice

Quick tips for implementation

- Create awareness about modeled activities by generating discussion about the preparation and procedures of the activities shortly after they occur in the classroom. Mention to the class when the activity worked as anticipated and when it was more or less effective than expected. Allow time for students to provide feedback and react to the activities.
- Place an agenda on the board as an advance organizer.
- Provide rubrics ahead of time.
- Engage in the types of activities students may one day teach (information gap, think-pair-share, chants, think alouds, picture walks, surveys) and make connections to their use in the language classroom.
- Model giving effective directions.

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Three: Provide opportunities for students to make informed choices.

Tedick and Walker (1995) note “Over decades, programs that prepare teachers for foreign language and ESL settings have concentrated on the ‘how’ without questioning the ‘why, what, or who’ of second language instruction” (p. 502). Students need discerning analytical skills to aid their evaluations and interpretations of the practices so they are prepared for new information that develops within the field throughout their careers.

We believe that teaching students how to make informed choices requires a breadth of knowledge of the field as well as real-life examples. For example, in our methods class we discuss several types of Audiolingual Method drills (Richards & Rodgers, 2001) and how and when to conduct them in communicative-based classes. For example, repetition drills may be useful when introducing new expressions to acquaint students with pronunciation and intonation. It is important

for PSTs to see the various activity types in terms of the roles they play in the layout of a lesson and also the potential benefits of activity types considered obsolete. When presented with a range of practices, PSTs see the value in instructional variety as one means of reaching a classroom of diverse learners (see Table 3 for ideas).

An effective way to engage students in this evaluative practice is by assisting them to analyze and ask questions. Students are encouraged to discuss methodological and assessment choices and theories from a critical vantage point; it behooves PSTs to see the strengths and weaknesses of various theoretical and practical constructs. One tool that has helped us to engage in taking a critical stance and asking *good* questions is the brief introductory reading in Larsen-Freeman’s *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*, 2nd edition (2000). As an introduction to the various methodologies detailed in the book, Larsen-Freeman tells readers (from her reading of Elbow’s 1973 article of the same title) to engage in the process of doubting and believing the methods presented. Larsen-Freeman encourages the readers of her text to be discerning, to judge and to doubt new ideas, but also to withhold doubt when necessary, in order to see the method from the perspective of its originator.

Table 3: Provide opportunities for students to make informed choices

Quick tips for implementation

- Encourage students to read pertinent journal articles in the field and critique them.
- Present multiple types of SLA models and require students to build their own version.
- Provide examples of textbooks and allow students to complete a guided textbook review (e.g., examine all the writing activities, analyze applicability).
- Provide examples of assessments and allow students to analyze them for strengths and weaknesses. Ask students to create their own assessment instrument.

Four: Provide in-class opportunities for practice.

Part of the process of becoming an experienced teacher in the field is practice and so it was important for us to build time into the course to develop this skill. Students may appreciate this opportunity as Johnson (1996) notes, they “complain that they get too much theory and too little practice” in their teacher education coursework (p. 765). Practice serves a vital role allowing preservice teachers to internalize and negotiate the key concepts needed to succeed in their initial teaching experiences. In fact, Celce-Murcia (1983), Coste (1983), and Vélez-Rendón (2002) among others, call for more active learning and less lecture.

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Clearly preservice preparation cannot teach students everything they need for their future teaching careers, however, we can provide a foundation to start new teachers on solid footing. New teachers need, among other things, practice with providing instructions, designing activities, planning lessons, developing syllabi, designing

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and obtaining visuals and materials, designing assessment tools, grading, doing real comprehension checks, and using technology appropriately.

These needs are addressed by offering a variety of opportunities for students during the methods courses. For example, in our FL methods course students are asked to create rubrics throughout the semester. First, the class collaborates to create a rubric used to assess the mini-teaching lessons that students present throughout the semester. Then, after the shared experience of designing a rubric together, students also create rubrics to evaluate the performance assessments included in their thematic units (i.e., interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational assessments). This repeated practice provides a base for skill development in an authentic context (see Table 4 for ideas).

These practice opportunities vary in that they may be conducted in small or large groups and that they may focus on analysis or skill development. For example, in our second language acquisition course, students are given the opportunity to facilitate class discussion in a large group setting. The class is divided in half and the instructor assigns the groups a position for or against a particular topic (e.g., Critical Period Hypothesis- whether or not an ideal window of time exists to acquire language) and

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gives them time to develop their case from class readings, discussion, and notes. Two judges are selected after group discussion and they facilitate the class conversation, allowing each group to present its case, eliciting additional information, and evaluating the most convincing arguments. In these types of debate activities, the judges have the opportunity to work with the class as a whole, facilitating but not directing the debate process, and they maintain their impartiality just as a practicing teacher does.

We do not just define practice as teaching a specific methodology but rather as the daily instructional tasks of a language teacher. This view is supported by Johnson (1994) who maintains that, “preservice teachers need procedural knowledge about the day-to-day operations of managing and teaching in second language classrooms...” (p. 451). A methods course can provide a supportive environment to practice these valuable day-to-day skills.

Table 4: Provide in-class opportunities for practice

Quick tips for implementation

- Co-construct class rubrics to evaluate in-class microteachings.
- Practice working with technology for example, creating a lesson using a podcast.
- Give students practice providing feedback.
- Allow students to develop teacher-made materials for their future classrooms.
- Conduct mock job interviews.
- Organize a tutoring project in conjunction with local K-12 district.

Five: Provide opportunities for reflection and active problem solving.

Many of the preservice teachers we encounter are students who have done well in school. They often have had a teacher or two who have been profoundly influential in their lives and these positive educational experiences have likely led them to choose teaching as a career path. A number of our students come equipped only with the “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975), that is, what teaching looks like from a student’s seat; they may not realize the number of simultaneous thoughts and choices being processed by a teacher during a lesson nor how to identify and effectively solve a classroom problem.

How does the experienced teacher know how to efficiently solve the problem? The teacher uses prior teaching experiences as a reference point and reflects on past lessons or moments within a lesson to generate a list of possible solutions. In order to convey the depth of the reflective problem solving process to preservice teachers, we engage in direct instruction of the concept, but we also use indirect intervention by asking questions, sharing our experiences, critiquing, and making observations (Freeman, 1989). Further, through this process, students are taught to develop solutions to their own problems or challenges (Tedick & Walker, 1995). These active problem solving techniques lay the groundwork for action research or “the process of studying a real school or classroom situation to understand and improve the quality of actions or instruction” (Johnson, 2002, p. 13). The focus on real scenarios through action research encourages the meaningful application of problem solving skills.

We encourage action research in our teacher education courses as supported by Brumfit (1983), Nunan (1990), and Tucker (1983). The rationale for the inclusion of action research in methods courses is to encourage students to discuss educational research, the process of action research, and to view their own role in the development of the educational community’s body of knowledge (see Table 5 for ideas). For example, in our Foreign Language in the Elementary Schools (FLES) methods course, after PSTs have taught local children in French, German, and Spanish for eight weeks, we ask them to generate a list of challenges, observations, or areas for improvement. With this list, we brainstorm how to further investigate these areas as an initial step in action research.

This process alone does not guarantee that PSTs will venture forth and be involved as teacher researchers, but it is one step closer to helping them visualize their own role in the developing body of knowledge within the field. Based on her literature review of reflective practice (including Mok, 1994; Kwo, 1996), Velez- Rendón (2002) suggests that action research in language education can lead to arming PSTs “with skills for reflection” and the ability to integrate “these skills into their teaching routines in a structured and systematic way.” (p. 461). We help our PSTs develop an internal

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monitoring system that allows them to understand how theories, practice, assessment, and reflection work together to inform their classroom instruction.

Table 5: Provide opportunities for reflection and active problem solving

Quick tips for implementation

- Require students to complete an action research project.
- Guide the class through think-aloud activities (or protocols).
- Require students to post their reactions to class readings on a discussion board or listserv.
- Ask PSTs to evaluate theories, methods, practices, techniques for various contexts and age groups by having them identify strengths and weaknesses.
- Keep a dialogue journal or blog between professors and PSTs.

Six: Encourage professional development.

To help our PSTs prepare for the real experiences that they will face in teaching, in hopes of increasing their success and retention in the field, we have found it encouraging to include professional development opportunities in our methods courses. Professional development is supported by ACTFL/NCATE's program standards (2002) that state "candidates understand the importance and benefits of belonging to a professional community. They are aware that there are different communities that support them in different ways at various points in their careers. More importantly, they understand that professional development is a life-long endeavor and an indispensable asset to becoming a contributing member of the profession" (p. 35).

In our program, we engage our preservice teachers in professional development early on through activities, such as conference attendance, memberships, and writing for newsletters.

To us, this means that PSTs acquire career development skills as well and begin to build a network of professionals who can serve as mentors, colleagues, and collaborators.

A professional network offers significant resources to PSTs that enable them to find answers to questions like: What are the real problems in the field and how will I cope with them? What are the resources available to teachers? How can I get a job? If PSTs participate in professional development opportunities, perhaps as a required part of their teacher education courses, then they may have some of their questions answered and feel more supported by the profession (see Table 6 for ideas).

In our program, we engage our preservice teachers in professional development early on through activities, such as conference attendance, memberships, and writing for newsletters. For example, after attending a conference, students share their experiences by contributing an article to the program newsletter. Not only do the students double up on their professional development (conference and article) but their newsletter articles may encourage other students to seize the opportunity to participate more deeply in the field.

In addition to going out to conferences, inviting members of the professional community into the methods courses is a great way to build the local network and experience “the voices—beliefs—of the already practicing teacher” (Ruiz-Funes, 2002, p. 3). In many of the methods courses, guest K-12 speakers are invited to share their advice about surviving the student teaching semester, finding a job, and teaching in the current educational climate. Appearances by the local K-12 network create a sense of unity and demonstrate articulation across the K-12 and university levels. Students may also feel more comfortable approaching an individual who is not assessing them or giving them a grade as they work toward their certification.

We strive to treat our PSTs as professionals while in their formation to support them fulfilling that role in future practice. Investing in professional development early helps create a network that goes beyond the time frame of the teacher education courses (Peyton, 1997) and benefits the teacher and the profession for years to come.

Table 6: Encourage professional development

Quick tips for implementation

- Require attendance at a conference or workshop.
- Suggest a subscription to a professional listserv (e.g. FLTEACH or TESOL-L).
- Collaborate with students in research and presentations.
- Encourage students to develop their own professional library.
- Collaborate with your campus’s Career Services office for resume and professional skill development.

Conclusion

In this article, we have identified some of the main challenges facing new language teacher educators since most are by and large left to their own devices and choices on two important instructional domains: (1) how to prepare teachers in their discipline, and (2) what content to include in the course. We have striven to share useful, constructive resources and principles informed by our experiences and a review of current research. Our impetus for this article—Without an overarching model of language teacher education, how do we, instructors of varying backgrounds and experience levels, come to a general consensus to plan and implement a methods course? —is a daunting question and we do not intend to imply that this article fully addresses the matter. Instead, it is our goal to establish a starting point for a greater discussion of effective teaching strategies, models, and techniques as we move toward including more voices, experiences, and research regarding language teaching methods courses.

Our more immediate goal of this article was to help new LTEs hear colleagues’ voices of experience and research on the instruction of language methods courses while helping them synthesize their own wisdom, experiences, backgrounds, and coursework to create the most successful methods course possible in their first years. Further, we hoped to share with the language teacher educator community

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our philosophy and choices in order to encourage reflection and discussion about interactive and meaningful language methods courses.

Meeting the challenges of teaching language method courses is a task that we each encounter as beginning TESOL/TEFL and FL language educators and it is not easily faced alone. In the spirit of partnership, foreign language and second language teacher educators may benefit from discussing the methodological preparation of their preservice teachers. We hope that this article will continue to promote FL and SL collaboration and dialogue among language teacher educators and lead to a shared understanding of the future of language teacher education.

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