

A Differentiated Approach to Community College Language Instruction

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Abstract

This article describes a differentiated approach to Russian language instruction in the community college. The paper examines standards and their relationship to students' learning goals. It suggests some classroom activities and argues for a differentiated approach to homework and assessment, with special emphasis on preprogram assessment.

Each student comes to Russian class at Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC) different in his or her own way. As their teacher, I strive to provide each student with a standards-based program that will enable him or her to make maximum progress towards achieving his or her goals. I do that by differentiating instruction based on several careful assessments of students' background, learning styles, and final objectives.

A quick look at how scholars have defined differentiated instruction helps frame this discussion. The Annenberg Media Learner.Org series entitled "Teaching Foreign Languages K-12," in its video called "Valuing Diversity in Learners," defines differentiated instruction as instruction that "occurs when teachers adapt tasks to meet the diverse needs—the different ability levels, proficiencies, learning styles, heritage backgrounds, ages, or grades—of students in a classroom."

There exists an abundance of literature that supports the use of differentiated instruction in foreign language education. In *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners* C.A. Tomlinson writes "In differentiated classrooms, teachers begin where students are, not in the front of a curriculum guide. They accept and build upon the premise that learners differ in important ways. Thus they also accept and act on the premise that teachers must be ready to engage students in instruction through different learning modalities by appealing to differing interests, and by using varied rates of instruction along with varied degrees of complexity." (Tomlinson, 1999).

In a book rich with helpful and practical suggestions and activities for foreign language classrooms, *Differentiated Instruction: A Guide for Foreign Language Teachers* Deborah Blaz identifies several beliefs and practices that underpin a well differentiated foreign language classroom. She writes that students have choices in what and

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how they learn, that students make connections with what they already know, that students learn how to learn, and that they can do all of this through multiple learning modes (Blaz, 2006).

Differentiating instruction is an approach to teaching rather than a specific technique or method of instruction. Differentiated instruction takes advantage of everything the student brings to class in an effort to facilitate language learning and give each student an equal opportunity to learn. Often, as Professor Donato notes in the Annenberg video, teachers teach to their own learning styles. In a differentiated classroom, the teacher teaches in a wide variety of styles giving each student a chance.

Standards

Can we teach many students in many ways and still maintain standards? In the world of foreign language teaching we are lucky to have two long established and widely recognized sets of standards, each nearly requiring differentiated instruction. The Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) Proficiency scale was developed, initially, in the 1950s. The American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proficiency scale was derived from the ILR scale in the 1980s.

The State Department identified and recognized the importance of proficiency-based instructional design for its trainees in the 1950s, following an internal Department review, which found that training needed to focus more sharply on what individuals did with the acquired language rather than on the socio-anthropological study of culture, which had been the main thrust of training at the Foreign Service Institute from 1947 to the middle 1950s. The publication in 1958 of William Lederer and Eugene Burdick's *The Ugly American* focused the nation's attention on diplomats and their inability to communicate with people in the countries where they worked. Finally, the October 4, 1957 launch of the Soviet satellite, Sputnik, put significant pressure on the State Department to improve its language training because the nation came to believe that American was dangerously behind the Soviet Union in many areas, including foreign language education.

After canvassing its employees on their language abilities, the State Department determined that self-assessment was not a reliable way to evaluate on-the-job language performance. The Department began a program of testing in the summer of 1958, based on proficiency in language use, rather than knowledge about the language, or achievement in specific training programs or classes.

Pleased with the information it was gathering about employee proficiency, Congress directed the Secretary of State in The Foreign Service Act Amendments of 1959 "to designate every Foreign Service office position in a foreign country whose incumbent should have a useful knowledge of a language or dialect common to such country"¹ Thus, at the State Department, each job at an embassy has a proficiency requirement, which could be at a specific level of proficiency, or a statement that some knowledge of the local language would be nice, or a statement that the position requires no knowledge of a language other than English. Depending on the employee's proficiency in the required language, he or she may proceed directly to work, or be assigned to language training at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI).

From 1960 on, proficiency at the State Department was measured in terms of what an employee was going to be required to do with the language and how he or she would use the language on the job, rather than by some other standard. The ACTFL proficiency guidelines retained the focus on end user needs even though most teachers do not know exactly how their students will use the language in coming years.²

The Speaking 2 (Limited Working Proficiency) level on the ILR scale leads with the sentence, “[Speakers are] able to satisfy routine social demands and limited work requirements.” The example portion of the skill level description at this levels continues, “While these interactions will vary widely from individual to individual, the individual can typically ask and answer predictable questions in the workplace and give straightforward instructions to subordinates” (www.govtilr.org/ILRscale2.htm#2). The ILR standards implicitly recognize that the final learning objectives for each student will be different. Since the objectives are different, because the jobs are different, the training for each student needs to be different as well.

If we look at the ACTFL proficiency scale at the same level, we see a similar approach. At the Advanced Mid level speakers “are able to handle with ease and confidence a large number of communicative tasks. They participate actively in most informal and some formal exchanges on a variety of concrete topics relating to work, school, home, and leisure activities, as well as to events of current, public and personal interest of individual relevance” (www.actfl.org/files/public/Guidelinespeak.pdf). While ACTFL does say that speakers at this level need to be able to handle all verb tenses, the thrust of the description is still focused on the individual language user rather than on specific aspects of the language.

The standards established by both the ILR and ACTFL clearly call for student centered, differentiated instruction. In order to apply the standards in concrete situations, the teacher needs to know why and how the students will use the language. In the government, the teacher needs to know what job the student will do and how that job uses language. In the schools the teacher needs to know the students’ individual areas of interest and the students’ own developing goals.

Goals

As we have seen from both the ILR and ACTFL skill level descriptions, student goals play a key role in realizing standards for the foreign language classroom. I collect information on student goals by having the students fill out a questionnaire during the first class period and by having them talk about their goals in a class discussion. I try to understand their real world needs for the language and the connections they are trying to make with other courses or other aspects of their lives.

Students take Russian language classes at NVCC for a wide variety of reasons: 25% of the students beginning Russian classes in the fall of 2005 said they were taking Russian because they wanted to learn the language. A few said they were taking Russian because they were interested in languages in general. 12% were taking the course because it meets a graduation requirement. A number of students take Russian language classes because they will help them on the job. Some take Russian for family reasons: to adopt children from Russian speaking countries, to talk with in-

laws, to talk with spouses (including Internet brides), or to get in touch with family roots. I have had several students take Russian for religious reasons: either to understand their own religions better or to travel to Russia as missionaries.

Most NVCC students are early to mid-career professionals, which is consistent with observations made by several speakers at the June 2004 “National Language Conference: A Call for Action,” sponsored jointly by the Center for the Advanced Study of Language (CASL) and the Department of Defense. They noted that as course requirements for majors increase and courses of study become more rigorous, fewer and fewer non-language majors are able to take courses in foreign languages beyond the courses required for graduation. Students who were not able to take foreign language classes, for whatever reason, during their regular college careers, seem to be turning to the community college for those classes once they are out in the real world. This seems to be especially true at NVCC. Over 50% of a typical NVCC Russian class in any given year has completed at least a Bachelor’s Degree, with several students having done some work at the graduate level.

Of the people taking Russian at NVCC who have only completed high school, more than half have established some sort of career for themselves and are coming back to college.

A small number of students in any given year take Russian at NVCC as part of their high school programs. Several home-schooled students have enrolled at NVCC, as well. Every year a number of retired people take Russian with a view to enriching their lives.

Over the past five years, Russian language students at the NVCC have had a range of different goals in mind. Some students wanted to focus on listening comprehension because they were preparing to take the Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT). Others have taken language classes to better communicate with co-workers on the job (a typical need for the auto mechanics, people working for NGOs, and the one professional ballerina who took my class). Like the military students, these students were also interested in listening comprehension in general and, in many cases, very specific technical or office-related terminology. The students who have taken Russian language classes because they were planning to marry or adopt Russians wanted to learn basic survival language for the home and travel to and from Russia.

Several students wanted to focus on developing their reading skills and learning the vocabulary used in diplomacy, international relations, and history since they were studying the language as part of, or preparation for, their graduate coursework in international relations. The retired students who studied the language for personal growth, seemed most interested in the story of Russia and sharing their own stories about Russia over the years. I learned to value the senior citizens in the class as making some of the most interesting contributions to our studies.

Assessment

Assessment plays a key role in differentiating instruction. Three key types of assessment underpin my instructional design: preprogram assessment, interim assessments, and end-of course assessments. I believe that good assessments are interac-

tive, with the students' assessment of the class playing as important a role as my evaluations of their progress with Russian.

Preprogram assessment takes place over the first couple of sessions. During the preprogram period, I gather baseline information about the students' proficiency in the four skills of speaking, reading, writing and listening. We also talk about learning styles, and I have the students do an online learning styles assessment. Finally, I try to learn what I can about the students' background that may help them in their language learning. Students come to NVCC with a wide range of language -related experiences and competencies. I have taught a mix of native and heritage speakers, including students with backgrounds in Russian, Bulgarian, Hawaiian, Hebrew, Italian, Kazakh, Korean, Portuguese, Shoshoni, Spanish, and Uzbek languages. Students also come with a wide range of backgrounds in the study of foreign languages. As one might expect, many students studied Spanish, French or German before coming to NVCC. An increasing number of students have experience with Arabic, and a smattering of students have studied other, less commonly taught languages. A small percentage of students have had no prior experience studying languages.

Students' education background, in general, and background in the study of foreign languages in specific, become major factors in producing an instructional design for any given class. I attempt to present grammar in several different ways, for instance. While students with undergraduate majors in foreign languages are quite comfortable with the grammatical terms, every class has students who panic when they hear words like 'adjective'. As I present the Russian case system in first-year Russian, I use the traditional names of the cases in both Russian and English, but also give students the option of calling the cases 'case one,' 'case two,' etc. Several students seem very pleased with this option each year. I tell the students that the class is designed to train them to use Russian and that I will never test them on grammar points specifically. So, if the grammar explanations are helpful, they should pay careful attention. If they are not, I will work with them to find other ways to cope with the structural requirements of Russian.

Like adults in any learning situation, NVCC Russian students make connections between what they are learning and what they have already experienced. As a trainer, the first challenge is to help students build on what they know without distracting or discouraging other participants. Typically, a few students will drop first year Russian in the early weeks, believing that the class is not at a beginning level, or that all the other students in class are smarter, or faster, or better than they will ever be. I try to reach out to all students and support them until they start to establish their own footing in the language. I do not always succeed.

The second challenge is to understand students' background well enough to be able to design a teaching plan that will take them from their current levels of knowledge and skill with Russian to the next level. Knowing about student backgrounds, and taking that knowledge into account when designing a teaching plan helps me help the students make progress with Russian efficiently. Take grammar, for instance. While my classes are proficiency based, language use is a rule governed activity. Giving adult learners just the right amount of grammar helps them make rapid progress. Students

who come to Russian with a background in one of the commonly taught languages bring certain strategies to the study of Russian, on the one hand, and expect certain types of grammar explanations and classroom activities on the other. Many students come to Russian class expecting to learn about prepositional phrases, for instance. I try to help them come to grips with the fact that while Russian has prepositions, the use of prepositional phrases as a grammar concept is not of much interest.

Students who have successfully learned Romance languages often want to begin their Russian studies by learning lots of words. While learning vocabulary is a key component in any course of language study, it is not what students should spend most of their time on in the early weeks of Russian. Word endings and cases often play a much more important role in Russian. Students, who focus on learning words in the beginning, rather than on acquiring the system of endings, tend to end up with a kind of fluent garbage at the end of the course.

At several points during the course, we stop and assess where we are and where we are going. I have done that by replicating the preprogram assessments for the four skill areas, by using traditional achievement tests, and, most importantly, devoting a period to talking about the class. Students are more than willing to tell me if something is wrong, or if my teaching style is not meeting their needs. Students have asked me to write on the board more frequently, have more frequent vocabulary tests. I have been asked not to call on some students too early in an activity, because they wanted more time to think about what we were doing. I have found these interim assessments to be among the most helpful pieces of feedback I get.

Recently, I have begun negotiating end of training assessments with individual students. Students talk with me about the final exams and how they would like to fulfill that part of the course requirements. Some students have opted for taking a traditional sit-down test. Others have written papers in Russian or done oral reports. Some students have created PowerPoint presentations on their topics of interest. One student did extensive translations. All students are measured against the standards for the course, but have options in determining how they will demonstrate their progress with Russian.

The basic concept is to take students where they are and lead them one step at a time to where they need to be. If you don't know where they are, if you don't know what their backgrounds are, you will have trouble moving them in the right direction. And, of course, the next logical step in this line of thought is that you can't take student in the right direction if you don't know where you are going. In order to know where to go, you need to know the students' reasons and goals for learning Russian.

Homework and Classroom Activities

Lesson plans for a diverse group need to include in-class activities and homework assignments that facilitate growth in the key skill areas for each subset of students: listening for the military students, reading for those going into graduate programs, speaking for people who need to communicate on the job and at home, and culture for the personal enrichment crowd. While writing training facilitates growth in all skill areas, few students need it as a primary subject.

A significant factor in determining the range of activities appropriate for a specific class is the diverse set of learning styles or preferences students bring to their studies. Some students learn by doing, others learn by seeing. Some thrive on rules and explanations while others prefer to discover the patterns for themselves. Some want to learn like children. Some want to just absorb the language from the air around them. Still others want to explore how this language is like the others they have studied.

In *Understanding Second Language Learning Difficulties*, Madeline E. Ehrman writes, “When there is a mismatch between the learner’s style [...] and the curriculum and teaching style of the course, there will be effects on the efficiency and effectiveness of the learning” (p. 50).³ When there is a preference mismatch, some students are left behind, or, as is often the case, leave the language class altogether. Attempting to understand student language learning preferences and finding ways to make class time productive for everyone is difficult, but rewarding. When 30 students populate the room on the first day of class, matching teaching style to learner preferences may seem like a Herculean task; on the other hand, few other efforts on the part of the teacher yield such significant results.

In “Understanding Learner-Centered Instruction from the Perspective of Multiple Intelligences,” Marjorie Hall Haley presents a chart matching the eight intelligences with instructional activities (p. 364).⁴ The chart could be extremely helpful in planning lessons for all learning styles, since learning styles are not unlike multiple intelligences. For instance, Hall-Haley writes that word order activities may appeal to logical and mathematically inclined students, while role plays might be especially good for kinesthetic ones.

While most students tend to want material presented in a sequential manner and follow the preferred order of the transfer sequence, NVCC is particularly welcoming to the enrichment learner. Students who have studied Russian previously (about 50% of the population) often take the courses out of order, as do heritage learners and native speakers. By including activities that can be done by students at several levels of proficiency, I am able to challenge students who are taking courses out of sequence, as well as those who come to the class with substantial backgrounds. By making classroom activities multileveled, I am able to set up situations where students can learn from each other and where I do not have to be the center of attention, or the “sage on the stage” (to borrow a phrase from Professor Donato in the Annenberg video).

For instance, we often listen to the evening radio news broadcasts from the Voice of Russia over the Internet at www.wrn.org. As a pre-listening activity we talk about what is happening in the world and what might be included on the Russian news. That allows us to talk about differences in selection of stories and differences in world view. Students predict what words they might need to be able to understand the story (and I supply them with those words if they do not know them already), as well as the kind of slant the news might have. Students at lower levels of listening comprehension may be able to confirm whether we successfully predicted the topic areas for the news by identifying geographic terms, proper nouns and personal names, recognizing some cognates. Students with higher levels of proficiency may recognize more words and may be able to pick up any ‘slant’ on the news. They may also be able

to identify any stories that the group had not foreseen. As we debrief on the stories I ask them specifically what they heard, which words and phrases gave them a hint about the topics and/or content of the stories. By working together, all students are able to contribute and are able to learn from one another.

Listening to ads on the radio is another radio-based activity that allows for students at several proficiency levels to exhibit and practice their skills. Students at lower proficiency levels may be able to pick up phone numbers while students with higher levels of proficiency are able to identify products and types of sales pitches. All of the students can talk about the style of radio advertising.

Sequential learners can be helped with the introduction of a 'road map' lesson very early in the process. I take one class period and 'teach' students everything there is to know about Russian. We go over all six cases, adjective noun agreements, word order issues, all of the verb forms, and rules for spelling. No student remembers it all. Sequential learners love the lesson, though, because it gives them the lay of the land for the language, which, in turn, helps them know where they are in their own sequence of acquisition. The overview lesson also helps most students focus their studies on what is important at any particular stage of acquisition.

Aural and visual learners have different needs in the classroom. Visual learners need to see what they are doing. Early in the year I tell students to remind me to write example sentences on the board for them, since that is something I frequently forget to do. When working with new words or dialogues, I always read them to the students in order to help the aural learners process the information.

Paper and Pencil Response (PPR) activities (also known as dictation) seem particularly successful in helping aural, visual, and kinesthetic learners process new information. The trick to PPR activities is to keep them at the practice stage of learning rather than letting them slip into a form of testing. Here's how it works: I hand out blank pieces of paper (the most common type of handout I use in class). I instruct the students to either fold the paper or draw a certain number of horizontal lines on the page. All of my instructions are done in the target language, of course. Once the students have folded or lined the pages, I have them number each line or box. I then replicate the pattern on the board. Then I tell the students to write the item on a certain line or within a certain box, "On the line with the number 19, write the sentence..." Finally, I write the sentence on the board and the students carefully check their work to see if they got it right.

At the end of this first stage of dictation, the students have a paper that can be manipulated for a wide variety of purposes. If we are studying subject verb agreement, I may ask the students to change various subjects. For adjective-noun agreement, I may ask them to replace one noun or adjective with another. Both aural and visual learners are actively engaged in learning. By the end of the semester, PPR activities are among the most popular.

PPR, of course, suggests the use of TPR (Total Physical Response) and TPRS (Total Physical Response with a Story) activities. I have found that morphing traditional early level TPR into a form of light aerobics is quite successful, especially for community college evening students who have already spent a hard day on the job and enjoy a

little bending and stretching. Kinesthetic learners thrive during the TPR periods! One year I was blessed with a native-speaking student from Moscow who worked as a personal trainer. Nothing could be more authentic than an aerobics class conducted by a coach who is also a native speaker!

The Meyers-Briggs personality test yields interesting information about learning styles. I have found the discussions about the dichotomy between Introverts and Extroverts extremely useful and productive where classroom activities are concerned. The primary difference between the two types of people is the manner in which they recharge themselves. Extroverts do it by seeking interaction with others. Introverts, on the other hand, energize themselves through introspection and reflection.

For language classes, however, it is more relevant to consider whether students process information internally or externally. In *Achieving Success in Second Language Acquisition*, Betty Lou Leaver, et al., writes “If you are an extravert, you are more likely to talk a lot in the classroom and seek new acquaintance in non-classroom language-learning settings. If you are an introvert, you will also want to talk (some more than others [...]) in class but will probably want to think about it first, even if briefly.”⁵

The language class that gets students to talk right away puts introverts at a real disadvantage. Introverted students need to be able to process their thoughts before they speak. Thus, at a minimum, speaking activities should be sequenced to let the introverts speak last. Some would like to know in advance what speaking activities will take place in the next class, so they can spend homework time thinking about what they will say. Extraverts, on the other hand, often think out loud, giving the teacher key insights into how the student is learning. Some fellow students may find such constant commentary disruptive, while others will use it to help in processing new information.

For me, the biggest difference between the traditional classes I used to teach in the 1980s and my work now concerns the area of homework. While classroom activities for a group of 30 or more students can be varied and targeted, they all still tend to take place at the same time and in the same space. Homework, on the other hand, presents a broad spectrum of possibilities and options.

During the first days of class at NVCC, I tell my students that I believe homework is very important, and that students who do homework tend to be better learners than those who don't. While I give them a syllabus that predicts where we will be in the textbook on any given day and suggests homework assignments in the workbook that accompanies the textbook, I also ask the students to think about the effect homework is having on their learning. I ask them to stop after a homework session and ask themselves whether they know more Russian now than they did when they started the day's assignment. If the answer is yes, we may be on the right track with homework. If it is no, and especially if it is no several times in a row, then it is time to think about other kinds of homework.

The activities in the workbook for the course are fairly traditional grammar-manipulation exercises or tasks. Sequential learners and deductive learners may find that kind of activity satisfying and helpful. Many students do not.

Some students keep journals in Russian. In the beginning, students often block on topics, but as they do more and more writing, it comes more and more easily. I look

at the journals when the students are ready for me to look at them, usually once every couple of weeks. I respond to the substance of the students' writing and do not focus on their mistakes. Students who do journals tend to build vocabulary nicely, but can also build some bad habits in terms of structure. I work with the students to develop a style of feedback that is most helpful to them. Some students want their mistakes circled in red. Others would like me to use the word or structure in my response. Some would like me to read and respond to the substance of what they have written. Those students who write and read in about equal doses tend to make the most progress.

A fairly large number of students have been drawn to translation as a homework activity. They choose articles or poems or songs and work on translating them into or out of Russian. The students choose their own texts to translate, and, thus tend to work in topic areas of particular interest and build vocabulary that is meaningful to them.

Many of the students at Northern Virginia Community College, as noted earlier, have close contacts of one sort or another with the local Russian speaking community. For many students, trying out what they have learned in class with coworkers, friends or spouses is an excellent approach to homework. Several students without ready made Russian conversation partners have found restaurants with Russian servers and stores with Russian speaking clerks as good places to practice their new language skills.

This year, one student asked me to make homework a course requirement for her and to count it as one-third of her final grade. She had found that if the homework wasn't required and if it didn't count as a specific part of her grade, she wasn't going to do it. After we created a homework 'contract' her performance improved significantly.

Students with Special Learning Situations

The fourth area for consideration in differentiating the foreign language class is students' special learning situations. I have had a number of students in class with real learning issues, including several ADD/ADHD students. Early in my career at NVCC, I had a student with autism. The student could work well in carefully chosen groups but did not work well with all other students. There were times when the student made astounding, off-the-wall connections. At other times, he just sat quietly in class. Working with the college's learning specialist, I learned to give all my assignments in writing, which helped the student remember what needed to be done. By the end of our two semesters together, I grew to have great respect for the student, since he had made it to college and succeeded in passing two semesters of Russian with fairly good grades! My student turned out to be a stellar learner of verb forms!

A mature student body means that many students have full-time jobs and significant family commitments. Since NVCC is usually the only institution offering evening Russian classes in the greater Washington area, many students travel significant distances to get to class. Many students have travel as part of their jobs (several have gone to Russia during the semester) and need to miss class time. Time is an issue for every-

one. For these students, a flexible approach to deadlines is exceptionally important. While I publish a calendar for the class, I am always ready to accept late homework or have students take their tests in the testing center rather than on the appointed night in the classroom. My flexibility is key to the ability of many to take the class. In my final assessments for the class, I try to evaluate each student's progress towards his or her own goals in light of the ILR/ACTFL skill level descriptions

Teaching at the community college level has its challenges and rewards. While we, as the teachers, may not be able to assess the needs of each and every student, we can still effectively impart instruction by differentiating instruction and expectations within the spectrum of students' goals, backgrounds, learning styles, and special situations. By introducing varied and interesting learning components in class and homework syllabi, we can address the wide variety of needs, concerns and learning preferences NVCC's diverse student body brings to any language class.

Through a differentiated approach to foreign language instructional design, we can make even very large classes feel much more like individualized lessons. The time a teacher spends understanding student backgrounds, identifying goals and learning styles and accommodating special situations, is time well spent. Students learn more successfully and come back for more classes.

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Notes

- 1 State Magazine, October, 1959, p. 26.
- 2 Foreign Service Circular No. 250, August 27, 1958.

- 3 Ehrman, M.E. [1966]. *Understanding Second Language Learning Difficulties*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- 4 Haley, M.H. "Understanding Learner-Centered Instruction from the Perspective of Multiple Intelligences," *Foreign Language Annals*, vol. 34, No.4 (this paper is also available on the Annenberg website).
- 5 Leaver, B.L, et al. [2005]. *Achieving Success in Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.