

The Four Pillars

Have you ever put your heart and soul into a relationship and, to your unending shock and discouragement, found that your efforts have just not been enough? You've bought her flowers. You've prepared him his favorite home-cooked meal. You've composed a song just for her. You've worn the outfit and perfume he likes best. You've written her a thoughtful and heartfelt letter. You surprised him with a gift on your one month anniversary as a couple. You've even started taking regular showers, for crying out loud, and wearing expensive aftershave just for her. And you complimented his mother on her dinner of quiche and ice cream pie without even once mentioning that you were lactose-intolerant. And yet...yet..."There's something wrong and there can be no denyin'. One of us is changin' or maybe we just stopped tryin'."

That sick realization that you are falling short is somewhat akin to the feeling you may have gotten one day, at the end of your last class, after the last student trudged from your classroom and, exhausted, you sat in silence at your desk, surrounded by chairs askew, paper debris to gather up and compositions to correct that would occupy another long evening. You had poured your energy into your classes day after day and yet you could tell, from the students' blank or even sullen faces, their vapid responses and their listless slouching, that something was most definitely missing in what you were offering them in class. Yet, you can't quite put your finger on the missing ingredient.

I know that I came to the point more than once during my teaching career where I had to ask myself just what it was that was missing. If you're there right now, or ever find yourself there in the future, with my apologies to Carole King, let me just say, "It's not too late (Baby)."

Over time, I came to see that, if my students' motivation had come crashing down around me, invariably it was because one of four "pillars" had become weak or, more likely, was entirely missing from my work with them. Those pillars that should undergird any world language program are effective curriculum, relationship building, first person sharing, and storytelling.

Whereas I want to explain what I mean by each of these terms, let me first emphasize that they apply at any point in the world language spectrum – from the entry level language class all the way up to an advanced placement course. Throughout this writing, I have limited myself exclusively to the issue of language acquisition for beginning language students. Before I conclude, however, I offer this chapter on the Four Pillars because one's pedagogical methods can be first rate, but the absence of any one of these four elements will cloud a classroom atmosphere with the dreary feeling of a seemingly inexplicable malaise.

The first pillar is that of effective curriculum. Its explanation should be almost unnecessary because its definition has dominated the contents of this book. Effective curriculum is that which respects the natural language acquisition sequence (listening to speaking to reading to writing). When that sequence works in tandem with sound pedagogical practices (initially conveying meaning visually, training students in 3-step thought, developing linguistic reflexes, initially prioritizing substance over form, etc.), it results in students who are confidently willing to run the risk of oral expression and who do so with a certain pride in their abilities.

As I wrote in the chapter entitled "The Teacher, the Time and the Task", "... students are not stupid. They can discern whether or not they are genuinely becoming able to speak their new language." It doesn't take them long to tell whether all of the trouble to which you and they are going to communicate, a bunch of Americans who could otherwise understand one another perfectly well in English, is really worth the trouble or if their efforts will inevitably just end in futility. They know if your course is genuinely about learning or rather simply about fulfilling a graduation requirement, as they fill in blanks in a mind-numbing procession of grammar packets thrown their way. Whether it be the ULAT or, better yet, something of your own creation, choose a curriculum that will train your students to think as does a native speaker and not one that opts for the path of least resistance and ends in 5-step speech.



Some of my students participating with Mexican young people in a choir rehearsal at a music camp near Puebla.

The second pillar of any successful foreign language program is that of relationship building. I'm not talking about relationship building between the students or with you as their teacher, but rather with native speakers of the target language. You need to break down the walls of the classroom. You need to demonstrate to your students that they are not merely handicapping themselves with a language not their own and playing some bizarre, arcane game within your classroom – like tennis players flailing away with their off hand while their strong hand is tied behind their backs – but rather that, together, you are honing a valuable, dynamic skill that is desperately needed in the world beyond

the classroom walls. To do that, you need to find ways to get them in frequent contact with native speakers. Ideally, that will be done in person, but it can happen remotely as well. Among the activities in which I had my students engage were inviting native speakers to class for my students to interview (as always, for oral participation credit), offering an ESL class in the evenings at which my students served as my assistants, Skyping with overseas classrooms, working as teachers or counselors in an overseas camp and exchanging e-mail and the PowerPoints mentioned in the last unit with overseas correspondents. Merely counting on graduation requirements and college placement to suffice as motivational factors, is much like assuming that you can move your students' to enthusiasm over learning the quadratic formula because, "Who knows? Some of you may need to use it someday!"

The third pillar has also been explained in great detail, so I will make this brief. First person sharing is interaction in which the teacher and the students have the opportunity to reveal something of themselves to the members of the class. By contrast, third person interaction involves talking about the fox and the crow, the characters in a book or movie or, weaker still, about the characters in a short and superficial, two-dimensional dialogue or scenario in a textbook. Particularly for the beginning language student, there is a place for third person discussions, but only for meeting very specific objectives and as a temporary transition to a higher level and more personal activity in which students segue from recounting the adventures of others on the screen or page into sharing about their own experiences, thoughts and feelings. First person sharing is fun and interesting because, face it, we all like to talk about ourselves and we are all curious to learn more about our neighbors.

The final pillar to solidify a teetering world language program is that of storytelling. Human beings seem to have an innate love for stories. As Hollywood can attest, we are all suckers for a good story – even for a mediocre one – anything that helps us escape daily monotony and to dream and imagine for a while. It is short-sighted, therefore, not to use as a teaching tool this natural fascination with fictional characters, imaginary settings, gripping or thought-provoking plots and surprising *dénouements*.

Once again, in the chapter entitled "Activities and Topics to Promote Oral Expression", I have already explained one way in which storytelling can be used. You can find that explanation in the last chapter in item number 2 of the list of activities and topics. Storytelling is all the more valuable if the story's content either highlights a specific range of vocabulary or has as its theme an important cultural element.

One of the most complete and fulfilling uses of storytelling I ever experienced with my students occurred when I showed them a very realistic, yet fictional film dealing with the challenges faced by illegal aliens crossing over the Mexican border into the United States. The story was extremely well told and consequently captured the students' interest and maintained it as I made use of the technique referred to above and found in the last chapter. However, we didn't stop there. At that time, I was blessed to have a teacher's aide who was a very eloquent and gracious Mexican gentleman and who, though a legal resident of the U.S., had himself grown up right on the border between the two countries. He was able to speak to my students very knowledgeably regarding the reality of the motivations and hardships brought out in the film and, as he spoke very little English, was obliged to do so in Spanish. Such an activity goes a long way toward showing your students that you're not just playing games in your course, but that there are real people who need those students to be taking your class very much to heart.

The Four Pillars of a successful world language program: effective curriculum, relationship building, first person sharing, and storytelling

[NEXT CHAPTER](#)