Whole Language in a Foreign Language Class: From Theory to Practice

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From Theory to Practice

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Abstract: *Theoretical perspectives from related disciplines such as early childhood education, bilingual education, and English as a second language education can be valuable in a foreign language education context. This article presents eight philosophical principles needed for implementing a whole language philosophy in a foreign language class and a description of the author's whole language foreign language class (WLFLC) as a practical example. The article outlines the three basic components needed to establish a WLFLC: (1) the classroom setting; (2) the resource books used in the class; and (3) the schedule of instructional activities for the class. The author also presents a description of four major activities used in this WLFLC: (1) language projects; (2) reading children's literature in the foreign language; (3) dialogue journal writing; and (4) portfolio assessment. General conclusions about implementing a whole language philosophy in a foreign language class are provided.*

Introduction

Some of the underlying principles of the whole language philosophy are not new in the educational field. At the turn of the twentieth century, progressive educators such as John Dewey advocated student-centered, activity-based learning (Dewey, 1929). French psychologist Jean Piaget (1952) contributed theories of developmental learning that led to a new understanding of learning processes. In congruence with these same philosophical ideas and supported by research conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, a gradual paradigm shift occurred away from eclectic language arts programs towards a more holistic view. Five areas of research supported this shift (Heald-Taylor, 1989):

1. *Learning development:* When preschool children experience a language-rich environment, they learn language developmentally, rather than through discrete-point formal instruction (Goodman, 1986).

2. *Oral language development:* Preschool children learn to speak by talking to significant others around them. They develop their own rule systems as their oral language emerges (Lindfors, 1991).

3. *Reading development:* The work of Goodman, Watson, and Burke (1987) on miscue analysis and the work of Frank Smith on reading (1971), among others, demonstrate that one learns to read texts by reading texts, rather than by learning to read isolated words.

4. *Writing development:* The works of Ferreiro and Tebrosky (1982) demonstrate that children invent their own writing systems, while trying to approximate the conventional system of writing.

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5. *Alternative evaluation:* Heald-Taylor (1989) supports a shift away from standardized tests of skills toward qualitative evaluation. Formal tests have a questionable aura of objectivity, and there are better forms of evaluation — such as miscue analysis, portfolios of work, and presentations.

Whole language is a philosophy about teaching and learning. Therefore, it can be implemented in diverse situations, with children and with adults, from different cultural and language groups without deviating from the basic philosophical principles that outline the learning processes. According to Goodman et al. (1987), the process of language learning and teaching is very similar across ages and educational contexts.

Some foreign language teachers and researchers have attempted to utilize whole language ideas in their practices. Barry and Pellissier (1995) used popular music in a foreign language class based on a mix of thematic units and whole language approaches. They concluded that the advantage of including songs in a whole language foreign language class (WLFLC) is that the students will encounter language in an authentic context that will provide them with the opportunity to understand themes from the target culture that are functional, interesting, and relevant. Moreover, they describe different goals that may be achieved through these activities: creating a positive mood, improving listening and reading comprehension, correcting common pronunciation problems, increasing accuracy, building vocabulary, providing opportunities to speak, and creating awareness of themes and issues that are valued by the target culture.

Redmond (1994) and Adair-Hauck (1996) used a whole language approach in their foreign language classrooms. Redmond (1994) describes the way that she developed and implemented an instructional unit that applied selected whole language strategies to teach reading and writing in beginning French. According to Redmond, the tasks given to students should be relevant to their world, and language activities should build on students' prior knowledge and experience. She also states that in a whole language curriculum, all skills should be integrated. Moreover, teachers should avoid the use of decontextualized texts, for example, word lists for teaching numbers, colors, and shapes in the same lesson.

Adair-Hauck (1996) describes how several teachers used a whole language approach in a foreign language class. Her study's foreign language teachers reported that the first step in a whole language lesson is the selection of an interesting story. She stresses the importance of organizing the whole language unit into three different phases: prestorytelling, storytelling, and poststorytelling. According to an earlier study, Adair-Hauck (1993) found that 90% of the students learning French using a whole language method stated that it was easier to learn French

by listening to stories.

De Godev (1994) used dialogue journals in her foreign language class. She asserts that a whole language method that integrates skills along with a dialogue journal activity helps students make connections between oral and written language skills.

Louton and Louton (1992) created a WLFC elementary class in which whole contexts, real purposes, and the belief that language was incidental to the purpose were implemented. They asserted that since in their elementary school setting there was a regular classroom teacher and a foreign language specialist working with the same class, both of these instructors should work on the same topics to create a "real" purpose for foreign language instruction. They developed units that took into account the natural context in which language is acquired as well as the differences between first language acquisition and foreign language acquisition.

Lems (1995) lists nine key principles in her working definition of a whole language class: (1) the language arts are integrated; (2) language is not an end in itself, but a means to an end; (3) students are immersed in literacy events; (4) students are surrounded by authentic print; (5) students learn by doing; (6) teachers respect and value each student's unique background, experience, and learning style; (7) learning is a collaborative activity; (8) students take responsibility for their own learning while teachers facilitate the learning process; and (9) assessment is authentic and appropriate.

Using Lem's idea, I have developed my own working definition of a successful WLFLC based on the following eight theoretical principles:

1. *Authenticity:* Learning should be based on the use of authentic materials, used for authentic purposes and with authentic audiences. As Goodman (1991) states: "experiences in school must have all the characteristics of authentic experiences outside the school and additional characteristics that are authentic within the social-educational context of the school" (p. 281).

Disassociation between real life settings and school settings is artificial and in most cases does not help students in their learning experiences (Goodman, 1993). In authentic language learning situations, participants predict meaning based on their own comprehension of the situational context (Krashen, 1985). Thus, situational context knowledge is used as a resource in foreign language instruction.

2. *Inquiry and negotiation-based curriculum:* Learning is the result of negotiations between the parties involved. In real life, this kind of behavior is natural (Short & Burke, 1991). In a negotiation, each party explains his or her own perspective on a particular issue. After taking careful consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of each

option, a decision is made. However, there are certain constraints that the participants involved in the negotiation need to establish as the boundaries of their negotiation. For example, children know very well the boundaries inherent in their families; they know when to ask the grandfather for something and when to go to the mother. They also know that on certain issues their parents are going to decide for them what is best. In the same sense, the teacher should set clear boundaries in the negotiation process. If students choose developmentally inappropriate materials for their inquiry project, the teacher should guide them toward more appropriate materials or help them access the information (in the case of a resource that is beyond their development).

In an inquiry-based curriculum, students are encouraged to research their own questions. Students need time to "wonder and wander" about a theme, then formulate their own questions, rather than start with questions already formulated by the teacher.

3. *Holistic perspective:* As teachers, we were taught that complex experiences are difficult to understand, especially so for younger students. In this vein, teachers should divide a complex object of study into smaller parts, each easier to understand than the whole. For example, in reading comprehension, according to Barnett (1989), bottom-up models of reading comprehension are essentially "text-driven": The reader begins by trying to decode letters, words, and sentences, building up comprehension in some type of linear fashion. After the students understand the parts, they may reconstruct the object of study as a whole again.

Some researchers have shown that the parts of an object of knowledge and the whole object of knowledge have different characteristics (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Goodman, 1986). As Ken Goodman asserts, reading words in isolation and reading words in texts are two different things: Many first-grade students were able to read three out of three words in stories but were unable to recognize these same words on a list (Goodman, 1993). Knowing the parts is not going to give the students a complete understanding of the whole.

Therefore, in a WLFLC, we explore holistically the complexity of the whole from the first day of class. Moreover, we encourage students to make their own divisions of the whole according to their unique developmental understandings.

4. *Developmental perspective:* Errors are an important and valuable part of the learning process (Piaget, 1971) and are an integral part of an environment that encourages risk-taking. Learning is a long, developmental process, and students are going to make mistakes, errors, and miscues during this process. As teachers, our goal is not to erase the errors, miscues, and mistakes made by our students, but rather to create environments in which students can develop new and better miscues, mistakes, and errors, which are more advanced and accurate than the previous ones. When teachers view misconceptions as sources of change, students grow cognitively in an environment that allows them to view failure and success as learning experiences. Students who learn from their errors become more comfortable risk-takers than students who are encouraged only to succeed.

5. *Alternative assessment:* In a WLFLC, the teacher is a "kid-watcher" who records and reflects on oral anecdotes, students' written drafts, and annotations made about a particular student's development throughout the year (Wilde, 1996). This idea of kid-watching, widely used in primary education, may be incorporated into high school and adult education. The teacher is "watching" for alternative ways to gather information about students' growth. For example, teachers may encourage students to develop portfolios and self-evaluate their work at the midterm and final points of the semester. Teachers may also keep their own anecdotal records of events that happened in the class or practice other forms of alternative assessment that showcase students' growth in terms of both process and product.

6. *Social perspective* — building a community of learners: Learning processes should be socially constructed (Goodman & Wilde, 1992). When a class becomes a community of learners, learning takes place in different social interactions, modes, times, shapes, and formats. This kind of learning utilizes the various resources present in schools: students in the class and students in other classes, other teachers and personnel in the school, librarians, secretaries, cooks, and so on. From outside the school community, parents and siblings of students and knowledgeable members of the community can also contribute to the learning experience. In this environment, teachers research their own questions in the target language, read their own books, and share their own writings, thus becoming valuable resources of modeling and inspiration for the students.

7. *Multicultural education:* The learning of a new language brings with it a revelation of a new culture. This learning process should be an opportunity for students to reflect on their own cultures and begin to understand the culture of the language that they are learning. Students' research and reflection on a foreign language may create opportunities to research and reflect upon students' mother tongue. Such research enables learners to empower themselves as individuals in a multicultural society (Ruiz, 1991).

8. *Critical pedagogy:* According to some researchers today, teaching is a political statement (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Banks, 1992). Teachers make choices for students in language classes: What type of language dialects are going to be included in the foreign language class? Are students

going to be able to use their mother tongue? How do teachers react to students' errors? How is knowledge constructed in the class? The answers to these questions imply a political perspective. Moreover, teaching language and culture fosters an understanding of larger sociopolitical issues such as racism, minority education, and gender relations. Teaching Spanish in the southwestern United States is not the same as teaching French in the same region.

Components of a WLFLC

This section describes other key components needed to create a WLFLC. Three major components for any language class are : (1) the classroom setting; (2) the resource books used in the class; and (3) the schedule of activities for the class. I use my beginning Hebrew class at a major southwestern U.S. university as an example of how a whole language curriculum can be implemented.

The Classroom Setting

The setting of a WLFLC is crucial to its success. Therefore, my first responsibility in setting up the class was to provide students with the opportunity to participate in a community of learners. To do so, it was necessary to have the same classroom five days per week, as well as be able to move furniture and post materials on walls (i.e., "environmental" print in the target language: bulletin board announcements, signs, posters, food labels, and so on). In early childhood education, it is well known that exposure to familiar and predictable written language in the environmental can act as a catalyst for language acquisition (Jones & Henderickson, 1970; Goodman, Altwerger, & Marek, 1989). A classroom with rich environmental print may also help adult students acquire some aspects of the target language, by exposing them to — and focusing their attention on — typical uses of the language. Originally, the university provided a classroom in the economics building with chairs bolted to the floor, and a bell sounded every hour. It was very difficult to conduct a WLFLC in that environment. Therefore, I contacted the Hillel foundation, a Jewish organization at the university campus. The foundation kindly provided an alternative setting for the class, a change that was very important in promoting the development of a community of learners.

The WLFLC met 5 days per week between 11 am and 12 pm. The class was composed of 35 students who had some prior experience with Hebrew and 1 student who was not Jewish and had no prior experience with the language. The age of the students ranged from 18 to 35, and class status varied from freshmen year to graduate school. At the Hillel foundation, the Hebrew language was already present in the environment: There were Hebrew-language posters on the walls, students wore T-shirts printed with the university's name in Hebrew, and so on. The room was large and provided a friendly environment in which to work, especially in groups. Unfortunately, flyers and other things of interest to a Hebrew class could not be placed on the walls because the space was used as a Synagogue during the weekend.

The following is a checklist teachers might draw upon in creating a suitable environment for foreign language development:
a. Display students' work in the classroom.
b. Provide students with rich environmental print in the foreign language.
c. Provide students with opportunities to work in groups.
d. Provide students with a place to keep their personal portfolios.

Resource Books Used in the Class

Instead of ordering 35 copies of the same foreign language textbook for the whole class, in this WLFLC the author developed a children's book library. Each student was asked to buy one book out of a list of recommended children's and young adults' literature. These books, some fictional and some nonfictional, had been designed for various audiences: children, young adults, second language learners, and others. The general class library included different genres of written materials in Hebrew, such as newspapers, tour guides, and magazines. The class was also provided with some reference books, for example, dictionaries, basal readers, and encyclopedias.

Three basic resource books were utilized: (1) *Israeli Hebrew for Speakers of English*, Book 1 (1978); (2) *The Hebrew and English Dictionary*, Banatam-Megido (1975); and (3) *Singing and Learning*, Geva (1985). None of these books was followed sequentially as recommended by the teacher's manuals. However, most students found that the basic sequence of the basal reader (*Israeli Hebrew for Speakers of English*) was helpful to their foreign language learning. For example, most of the students started to communicate using the present tense only, and not until the middle of the first semester did students start asking questions about past tense. When questions occurred, the teacher encouraged the students to investigate the relevant chapter in the resource book in which such basic ideas were explained. In many cases, students' questions developed into projects shared in class (as discussed fully below). Other questions raised by the students concerned concepts like numbers, days of the week, food, and so forth. The same strategy was used again, and the Hebrew books and the Hebrew dictionaries were then consulted. On Fridays, we usually sang from the book "*Singing and Learning*."

There has been much debate over the use of basal readers versus "good literature" in the whole language

class. It has been my experience that using both good literature and basal readers as resource books for the students may help students accomplish a better grasp of the target language. The resource books (dictionary, basal reader, anthology, etc.) provided grammar, syntax, and vocabulary conventions. A varied classroom library (both works of fiction and nonfiction, as well as children's and young adult literature) in the target language provided authentic and holistic language experiences for students' use and appreciation.

Schedule of Activities for the Class

For the first 4 weeks, the teacher introduced the class community to activities such as dialogue journal writing, study groups, short-term language projects, and oral reading of children's literature. After the class had met for 4 weeks, the students and the teacher negotiated the routine schedule. A routine schedule is valuable in a WLFLC because it creates predictability within the otherwise open opportunities of the course.

Sample Routine Schedule

Monday: Students read the teacher's **dialogue journal** responses and write their entries (taking most of the hour). The teacher reads aloud from a children's book chosen for the week.
Tuesday: The class is divided into **two study groups**. Students share with each other the discoveries that they have been making through their projects. The teacher again reads aloud from the weekly children's book.
Wednesday: The students work in groups to **develop language projects**. On this day, the teacher usually **reads aloud from a new children's book** in Hebrew. This book is predictable in content and is read again and again during the week.
Thursday: Same as Tuesday.
Friday: **Projects** were due every 2 weeks. **Drafts of students' work** must be approved by the instructor at least 1 week in advance. The teacher reads aloud from the weekly children's book. Dialogue journals are due on Friday as well. In addition, on most Fridays, the class sets aside time for special, Sabbath-related activities like singing Sabbath songs.

Major Activities

The four major activities used in the author's WLFLC were: (1) language projects; (2) reading children's literature in the foreign language; (3) dialogue journal writing; and (4) portfolio assessment.

Language Projects

As part of the negotiation of curriculum (Short & Burke, 1991), students were encouraged to think about ideas and projects that could be developed during a 2-week period. Some of the students developed projects that continued more than 2 weeks. One aspect of each project was to find a way to show and share the results with the class. Many different forms were used, including presentations, listening to audiotapes, poster presentations, and lessons to the entire class.

In the beginning, students did not show the teacher drafts of their projects until the day of presentation. This practice was not very successful because many times students needed more guidance from the teacher. Having students turn in a draft of the presentation 1 week in advance offered the teacher the opportunity to mediate (Vygotsky, 1978) their work. I came to realize that one project every 2 weeks was very difficult for the students. I decided then to allow them more time to complete longer-term projects.

Students completed a variety of projects throughout the course: Some researched a biblical text in its original language; others wrote letters to family and friends in Israel; some wrote travel guides to Israel. Tony and Linda completed a particularly interesting project: a comic book in Hebrew with a main character named "Super Jew," who looked very similar to "Superman." Like Superman, Super Jew strived to save humanity from evil, but unlike Superman (who dressed in a telephone booth), Super Jew dressed behind a burning bush! The book was very funny and the students enjoyed it.

Long-term language projects are an important activity in a foreign language class. Students develop language as a means to an end and not as an end in itself (Schwarzer, 1996). It is important that students share their projects in the WLFLC, thus developing bonds within the community of learners.

Reading Children's Literature in the Foreign Language

The role of children's literature in this beginning WLFLC was to support the students in choosing and pursuing their own questions (Short & Burke, 1991). During the year, their questions became more sophisticated, for example: Why was the children's book written using the male pronoun only, even though the book was appropriate for both male and female children? Why does the author choose a specific word instead of another? By the end of the year, some students were researching the Bible, and concerns about translation and the role of the translator became relevant to their inquiries.

Reading children's literature aloud was one of the most successful activities at the beginning of the year. I read picture books, especially books with predictable and patterned stories, in which each page had only a few words and a picture. Using the pictures, students were able to guess the meaning of the text. The students lis-

tened to the whole book at the first reading. The same book was read orally again day after day for the whole week. Reading one book each week, and reading it again and again throughout the week, encouraged students to use the vocabulary from the books in their oral and written language assignments.

I was hesitant to introduce children's literature in a college-level class and looked for a way to make the reading of children's literature an authentic assignment for the class. Therefore, as part of grading requirements, students were to read a children's book to grade school children in one of the area's Jewish schools. This assignment was both a good excuse to use children's books at the college level and a good opportunity for foreign language students to use the language in an authentic context.

Throughout the weekly readings of the same book, some students were able to read with the teacher some of the paragraphs, to predict others, and even sometimes to lead the readings by themselves. These observations became an alternative assessment tool and a good indicator of students' Hebrew proficiency development. I took notes on which students were able to lead reading sessions and which students were able to follow some of the paragraphs.

However, by the end of the year, this activity was no longer successful. The themes of the children's books were no longer interesting to the students, and their motivation to continue this activity diminished. I might have shifted to adolescent picture books or newspapers, but I was afraid that the complexity of the language and the lack of pictures would make these materials too difficult to understand.

Dialogue Journal

Dialogue journal writing is a well-established activity. As Staton (1988) defines it:

> "Dialogue Journal" writing is the use of a journal for the purpose of carrying out a written conversation between two persons, in this case a student and a teacher, on a regular continuous basis. (p. 4)

Popkin's (1985), however, expresses ideas about dialogue journals that are very different from Staton's:

> When students start their diaries, mistakes are to be tolerated with only a few written corrections by the teacher... . For the first two or three assignments [entries], guidelines were set up and specific topics were assigned because many students drew a blank when they were asked to write about their impressions of the new semester in French ... (p. 154)

Dialogue journals were used in this class to maintain regular communication or dialogue between the teacher and the students, with the major focus on real communication. In the dialogue journal, both teacher and students "talked" to each other in writing. The teacher responded to the students' entries in writing, but in contrast to Popkin's use of the dialogue journal, did not correct students' grammar, syntax, or spelling. Instead, the teacher modeled conventional writing for the students in his response.

Portfolios

Evaluation was conducted through dialogue journals, anecdotal records, and the development of a portfolio (Whitmore & Crowell, 1994).

Students were required to hand in portfolios of their work at the end of the semester as one means of assessment. The portfolio represented the work that the students did during the semester and demonstrated their growth. Some of the students did not immediately understand the difference between a complete collection of work and a selection that showed growth. However, by the end of the second semester, students were able to put together very interesting portfolios that included audio and videotapes, posters, notes from class, and so on.

The final portfolio for the classes included: (1) two or more written pieces about students' inquiries in Hebrew; (2) the titles of two resources read in Hebrew that were shared and discussed with a group of students; and (3) an audiotape or videotape recording of an oral presentation.

Padilla, Aninao, and Sung (1996) state that teachers need to consider what students should put in their portfolios and how often. These decisions should be driven by two considerations: the portfolio's purpose and its audiences. Therefore, in this WLFLC, students were encouraged to find both a purpose and an audience for their portfolio. During the final week of classes, the teacher held individual conferences in which students presented their portfolios. Each students prepared his or her presentation with a specific purposes in mind, for example, to communicate in the target language while visiting Israel; to showcase the ability to read and understand some of the Bible's passages; to write a letter of complaint in Hebrew to the Israeli consulate in the United States.

These portfolios gave the students and teacher an alternative means of evaluation. As part of the self-evaluation process, students were encouraged to write a reflective piece in Hebrew or English about their progress in the target language, providing insights and "hard evidence" to support their claims. One option used by many students was to rewrite or correct one of their earlier pieces of writing to show their development. We used this reflection piece as part of the evaluation during our individual conferences at the end of the semester. During these conferences, students made a case to support their progress as reported in the reflection piece in front of a real audience (the teacher).

In this WLFLC, portfolios were used for an alternative

way to assess both products and processes. The portfolios started as collections of students' works and only later in the semester did they become growth-representing selections of work.

A list of possible portfolio items was given to the students:

- Notes (in Hebrew) of any grammatical rules that they had learned.
- Titles of Hebrew stories that they had read.
- All journal entries.
- Any other written pieces such as letters, poems, memos, etc.
- Any "tips" that they found useful in learning Hebrew.
- Any research reports related to Israel or the Hebrew language.
- Midterm and final self-evaluations.
- The teacher's midterm and final evaluations of the student's progress.

Conclusion

The implementation of whole language in the learning of foreign languages is not yet well established, but it is underway. Barry and Pellissier (1995), Redmond (1994), Adair-Hauck (1996), de Godev (1994), Louton and Louton (1992), and Lems (1995) have used a whole language approach in the foreign language classroom.

The purpose of this article was to share my own working definition of a WLFLC, providing examples from my own foreign language Hebrew class. The three basic components of my WLFLC were: (1) the classroom setting; (2) the resource books used in the class; and (3) the schedule of activities for the class.

It is this author's claim that:

1. The classroom setting should display students work, provide a learning environmental rich in print materials, and use the community as a resource.

2. There is a need for both basal readers as well as literature in the foreign language class. Basal readers should be used, with dictionaries and other books, as resources. Children's and young adults' literature and books from varied genres should be available to students in the foreign language class library.

3. A routine weekly schedule of activities should be negotiated with students, to help students deal with the open-opportunity nature of the WLFLC.

I have also described four major activities used in my WLFLC: (1) language projects; (2) reading children's literature in the foreign language; (3) dialogue journal writing; and (4) portfolio assessment.

It is further this author's claim that:

1. Language projects in the foreign language class are a viable option as an authentic use of the target language.

2. Oral reading of children's and young adults' literature in the foreign language class is an invaluable resource for exposing students to authentic language in predictable contexts.

3. Dialogue journal writing fosters authentic written communication between the teacher and the students.

4. Portfolio assessment, dialogue journal entries, and anecdotal records are viable forms of alternative assessment in a WLFLC.

I hope this account will be useful to other foreign language teachers — not as an inflexible recipe — but as a call for continued experiment with new pedagogies in the foreign language class.

Acknowledgements

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