Curriculum Renewal Initiatives: Language Communities and Experiential Learning in Second Language Education

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Abstract:
Second-language research studies on cognitive style differences and multiple intelligences acknowledge the importance of meaningful contexts for second-language instruction. According to Gardner, learners have several, autonomous types of intelligences that can be developed progressively (Gardner, 1991). Since the combination of language background, skills, personality and expectations may vary from student to student, teachers need to constantly develop teaching approaches which engage students and help them take charge of their own learning (Holec, 1981).

The current paper proposes a model of experiential learning specifically designed to develop student autonomy, cognitive and metacognitive skills and second language conceptual fluency at intermediate and advanced levels. A number of curriculum renewal initiatives which integrate an on-line language community for undergraduate students will be the focus of our discussion. In order to bridge the gaps commonly associated with the students’ previous learning experiences, many of the proposed strategies support a progressive development of skills and encourage language-learning awareness and cross-cultural understanding. Students who are allowed flexible time limits and have more opportunities for individual and collaborative learning will become autonomous learners, show academic leadership and increased participation in community organizations.

Many non-traditional, alternate activities proposed by students can provide challenging work, particularly for those who already have an intermediate competence in the second language. One of the activities highlighted will be the organization of a mini-conference (Colloque littéraire) by undergraduate students, an integrated curriculum activity which helped develop students’ thinking abilities and pushed them to engage more deeply in topics related to their academic learning. Information and communication technologies were used to investigate literary topics further and enabled all students to develop presentations with a higher degree of complexity. Through their engagement in collaborative tasks and cooperative learning, the students were able to build positive peer relationships and learn new information which filled in the gaps in their linguistic knowledge as they tried to express themselves within the context of an authentic need for language use.

Finally, a major benefit of participating in an integrated language learning community is the direct access to a variety of local and international organizations which promote second language learning. The integration of a school internship program, a non-remunerated learning experience which allows students enrolled in French as a second
language to assist teachers in their own classrooms is another example of a curriculum initiative. According to program evaluations completed by school interns, the acquisition of important social and academic skills greatly enriched their experience and empowered them: they understood the great benefit of learning a second language and were also more willing to use their second-language skills for study-exchange, travel and work abroad.