High-Leverage Teaching Practices in Foreign Language Education

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Introduction

High-leverage teaching practices (HLTP) are a core set of teaching practices that, when executed proficiently by accomplished novice teachers, are said to promote higher gains in student learning over other teaching practices. In this project, we look at how teacher candidates execute high-leverage teaching practices in an early second language learning program. The purpose of this research is to identify various HLTP, find evidence of gains in student learning, and develop materials and assessments to teach and evaluate these practices and their use in Foreign Language Exploratory (FLEX) classrooms.

What Participants Say about HLTP

The participants involved in this study were UWEC students enrolled in Education Studies 437, Teaching Foreign Language in Grades 7-12. This methods course included a week-long practicum in teaching elementary, middle, and high school language. The students were all majors or minors in Spanish, French, or German education and were planning to teach at the elementary, middle, or high school level. Of the sixteen participants, one was male and fifteen were female. The participants were aged 21-24 years old. One was a native speaker of Spanish.

What we did

ES 437 students were taught about three specific HLTP: making input comprehensible, asking questions, and collecting information. The participants rated themselves on the use of HLTP during preparation and reported their use of HLTP at three points during the practicum. These students were then encouraged to incorporate HLTP into their lesson plans for their FLEX classrooms. We carefully observed each participant giving two lessons and took note of their HLTP use. Each participant was interviewed for 30 minutes at the end of each lesson to discuss their use of HLTP and the effectiveness of each HLTP in that lesson. These interviews and the lessons we observed were audio-recorded and transcribed, coded for HLTP data, and used for our analysis.

How HLTP were used in the Classroom

While we were observing the students in their FLEX classrooms, we kept tally of how often each HLTP was used and had students report on their own use of HLTP in the classroom. Based on the data we collected from the classes we observed, we found that the practices used most frequently was making input comprehensible, followed by collecting ongoing assessments and then asking questions. The use of making input comprehensible was evident through the abundant use of props and visuals (e.g., charts, photographs, etc.), gestures, and use of repetition, such as the rule of three (e.g., describing a word or concept three different ways). We also observed some evidence of ongoing assessments, such as the use of graphic organizers and collecting visual responses; using inductive, or “thumb-up” approaches. The students often tried questioning sequences as well, but not frequently, moving from basic yes/no questions to either/or to open-ended questions in order to encourage confidence and increase the number of student responses.

Micro-practices

At each of the HLTP that we are studying can be characterized by micro-practices, subset of practices that are implemented as part of creating the HLTP. We found that this micro-structure was related to the making comprehensible category. Participants reported using visual materials (charts, graphs), use of gestures, use of simple and explicit language, and repetition of words as the most frequently used micro-practices. The least frequently used micro-practices related to Asking Questions and Collecting Information from all students. See Table 1 for a list of these micro-practices.

What Participants Say about HLTP

“I have learned that there are many times in lessons that could benefit from HLTP that I haven’t been aware of before. I think the more I get to practice, the better that I will become.”—Participant 9

“I feel that as a pre-service teacher I am beginning to understand how to make input comprehensible. I think the more I get to practice, the better that I will become.”—Participant 99

These quotations suggest that teacher education programs need to provide the necessary time to develop and practice competence in a few fundamental practices that are developmentally appropriate for beginning teachers.

Implications of Research

Findings from this study can be used to develop syllabi for other methods courses that wish to include HLTP teaching materials to teach these practices, and further explorations into whether new HLTP are encouraged during practicum or other language classes. Participants reported that they had found that students need extra work on asking questions, the use of input, and the strategies and activities that will help them to better understand specific techniques. Finally, while the participant, as a general rule of making input comprehensible, they were also committed to a small set of micro-practices (see Table 2). Further exposure in and practice with other micro-practices could help to further input experiences with making input comprehensible.

Future Research and Limitations

In this study, we looked at identifying a few high-leverage teaching practices that could provide further gain in student learning over other practices during a FLEX experience. We did quantitative analysis to keep track of how the practices were used and qualitative analysis to provide evidence of their effectiveness. In the future, further research can be done to identify other possible HLTP in this content area and study the effect on students’ gains on a large-scale. Results could also be used in how to best introduce these lessons to current foreign language educators without previous exposure to HLTP. Our ambition at this study is the limited time we had for teaching HLTP and providing participants the opportunities to practice them.

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