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Best Practices in Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract

This literature review explores the best practices in the setting of a second language classroom. The review begins by discussing a historical perspective of best practices in second language learning, legislation on the subject area, and general information about foreign language classrooms. Following, the review covers “core effective practices” as detailed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign languages. Used interconnectedly, these practices support one another and provide curricular alignment with purpose; however, many questions remain as to the specificity of such practices as much of what is available remains vague.

Best Practices in Foreign Language Learning

Second language learning classrooms are common in most high schools and even in some primary schools. Although second language has become somewhat of a norm in the high school setting to some extent, research and resources available to those who teach the subject are limited. While foreign language teachers are able to use general classroom practices to help guide their instruction, specific, content-based practices for the topic are still disputed. Literature that is available on the topic of best practices in this content area follows.

Historical Perspective of Best Practices in Second Language Learning

Historically speaking, two sources have been the at the forefront for such a topic – the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and the National Association of District Supervisors of Foreign Languages (NASDFL), however, only recently have best practices been identified by such entities and even so, little information is available in regards to best practices in foreign language learning yet today. Similar to other high school electives, foreign language learning is an often forgotten content-area. There are no official standards that apply to the topic and what’s more, little legislation concerning the topic exists. The extent of legislation in regards to this topic deals with the establishment of foreign language programs in schools and funding. For example, the bill S. 1036 (113th): Foreign Language Education Partnership Program Act sought to provide grants for developing and maintaining successful programs of K-12 foreign language learning that have demonstrated an increase in the number of students graduating from high school with an advanced level of proficiency in at least one foreign language and to provide information on these successful programs to others. (Lautenberg, 2013). Although such an amendment was introduced, it unfortunately died and no changes were made to Section 5494 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

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Other legislation in regards to foreign language learning deal with funding for the content area such as the Foreign Language Assistance Act of 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Finally, the Higher Education Act encouraged leaders to receive recommendations in regards to areas of national need for expertise in foreign languages and world regions. (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This legislation shows some support for foreign language learning and advocates such a topic, however, such support is relatively vague and incomplete in regards to how to best teach the subject.

Second language learning is not a new concept in schools, but the fact is that best practices for the subject have not yet fully developed. A few trends have been identified, however, there lacks consistent research. With the information available on the subject, it seems to be best to refer to the most reliable source on the topic available – the ACTFL. This council is an individual membership organization of language educators and administrators that encourages improvement and expansion of the teaching and learning of all languages at all levels of instruction (ACTFL, 2016a). This council has created a set of standards of foreign language teaching and learning by which all second language teachers are encouraged to use in the United States. The standards detailed deal with communication (interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational), cultures (relating cultural practices/products to perspectives), connections (making connections and acquiring information and diverse perspectives), comparisons (language and cultural), and communities (school, global, and lifelong learning) (ACTFL, 2016b).

From the national standards, the ACTFL has identified a number of best practices, or as they refer to them, core effective practices, that align and specifically support the standards which teachers are to meet in their foreign language experiences. Some of the practices are

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foreign language content specific, and others are recognized more broadly in education as best practice in several areas. The core effective practices for foreign language learning are:

1)“use target language for learning: students and teachers speak, listen, read, write, view, and create in the target language 90% or more during classroom time: comprehensible input, contexts, and interactions, 2) use authentic cultural resources: present interactive reading and listening comprehension tasks using authentic cultural texts with appropriate scaffolding while promoting interpretation, 3) design communicative activities: teachers design and carry out interpersonal communication tasks for pairs, small groups, and whole class instruction, 4) plan with backward design model: instructors identify desired results then determine acceptable evidence then plan learning experiences and instruction, 5) teach grammar as concept and use in context: students focus on meaning before form, and 6) provide appropriate feedback: oral corrective feedback in speech or writing elicits output beyond a simple yes or no response” (Swanson & Abbott, 2015, p. 19).

Target Language Use

The use of the target language for learning is identified as a key practice in language learning by the ACTFL as well as by the National Association of District Supervisors of Foreign Language (NADSFL). While many agree on this practice, how to most effectively use it is still under consideration. The specific use of the target language is important because it serves as the most significant source of authentic, scaffolded input. Larsen-Freeman, Lightbown, Liu, and Turnull (as cited in Kramer Moeller & Roberts, 2013) have shown that the amount of TL input does affect learners’ target language development and Carroll, Wolf, Burstall, Jamison, Cohen, and Hargreaves (as cited in Kramer Moeller & Roberts, 2013) have established a direct and

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positive correlation between learner achievement and teacher use of target language. The significant use of the target language has been found to increase motivation in students as they realize the immediate usefulness of the target language by Macdonald and Wong-Fillmore (as cited in Kramer Moeller & Roberts, 2013). This support for exclusive use of the target language has led most language professionals to accept it as a best practice in second language learning and teaching (Kramer Moeller & Roberts, 2013).

A disagreement arrives with the issue of the use of the native language in establishing meaning versus the exclusive use of the target language. On one side, advocates such as Krashen see little pedagogical or communicative value in the first language and on the other, many see use in establishing meaning in the native language (as cited in Kramer Moeller & Roberts, 2013). For example, Van Lier and Cook advocate that simply using L2 (the second language) does not ensure second language learning since input must become intake before it may be internalized; that is, students must be able to understand and make sense out of the L2 input in order for effective language learning to take place (Kramer Moeller & Roberts, 2013). Participants in Macaro's study agreed that the target language should be the focused language of interaction in the classroom, however, qualitative studies show that the actual amount of target language use by teachers in the classroom varies significantly (as cited in Kramer Moeller & Roberts, 2013). Many teachers often use code-switching (switching between two languages) and believe it to be necessary, even so, Macaro's research proves this errant and lamentable (Kramer Moeller & Roberts, 2013). Additionally, many teachers show concern over the use of the native language even though studies by Anton and DiCamilla (1998), Swain and Lapkin (2000), and Watanabe (2008) show that the first language can be helpful as a cognitive tool that assists the second language learning process through scaffolding (Kramer Moeller & Roberts, 2013).

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To add fuel to the debate, Dickson found that the quantity of exposure to the second language is not as important as the quality (Kramer Moeller & Roberts, 2013). As a result of these studies, Swain and Lapkin and Turnbull and Arnett have reexamined the exclusivity of target language use in the classroom and have since advocated for maximized target language use as opposed to exclusive target language use (Kramer Moeller & Roberts, 2013). These results from Turnbull, Dickson, and Py argue that learners that use their first language as a reference can more easily process language from input to intake which results in a better understanding of the second, target language (Kramer Moeller & Roberts, 2013). Despite these findings, caution MacDonald advises against the overuse of the native language to avoid student de-motivation (Kramer Moeller & Roberts, 2013).

Despite all the research and results of such research, there remains little evidence of the effect of target language versus native language use from which experts can make sound pedagogical and policy decisions (Levine, 2003). The question of how much and when the native language can or should be used varies based on a variety of related classroom practices. With that being said, the ACTFL has settled on 90% of language used in the classroom as a target which challenges teachers to remain in the target language as much as possible, but reserves the opportunities to switch codes for a variety of reasons if the need arises.

Authentic Materials

Davies argues that everything the learner understands is authentic for him (Berardo, 2006). Although the primary use of the target language by the instructor allow students to process the second language, many times this type of language is not necessarily the same as what might be experienced outside of a school-setting. Thus, a main reason for using authentic, cultural material is to provide opportunities for learners to experience as much native language as

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possible. These materials are considered outside the “safe” controlled language-learning environment, where it is thought that students will avoid the artificial language that is often used within the classroom. In these situations, the role of the teacher is to prepare students for the complex language, not delude it, lending awareness and the necessary skills so students may comprehend what is necessary in second language learning and speaking in the real world. Berardo (2006) found that this particular use of authentic materials was highly motivating; giving students a sense of achievement once the material was understood. They also found that once this sense of accomplishment was achieved, students were encouraged to investigate further with reading that is more authentic. Finally, Berardo (2006) found that other main advantages of using authentic materials included the capability for teachers to relate more closely to students’ needs and support a more creative style of teaching.

Although the positives of using authentic reading materials outweigh the negatives, it is unethical to deny the existence of such negatives. Aspects of the use of authentic materials include cultural bias, the complexity of structures used surpassing student capabilities, and the requirement of knowledge of cultural background (Martinez, 2002). Richards (2001) notes that most times authentic materials contain difficult language, unnecessary vocabulary and complex language structures. This can be especially problematic for students and can create obstacles for teachers. If the wrong type of text is selected, the vocabulary and grammar context may not be relevant to the students’ needs, or the level of difficulty can actually end up reversing motivation and self-efficacy. Furthermore, authentic reading material can become dated very quickly making the material less authentic as it dates and putting a strain on teachers to remain current.

Using these authentic materials not only appeals to core effective practices in second language teaching and learning, but also supports research in other areas of the profession such

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as AIW, or Authentic Intellectual Work. The purpose of AIW as a professional development model is to transform the quality of student learning through teacher professional development (The Center for Authentic Intellectual Work, 2017). By using authentic materials in the foreign language classroom, we are accomplishing the goals of a broader educational spectrum.

Grammar in Context

Second language teachers strive to teach a variety of elements in their classrooms, including grammar. While different teachers take varying approaches to the importance of grammar accuracy as well as the theory behind how students acquire a second language (is it like acquiring a first, or not?), all teachers should strive to teach grammar in the context of the language and culture.

Several grammar-teaching methods have been utilized throughout the years. The earliest method, known as the Grammar-Translation (G-T) method, focused on translations of printed texts, learning of grammatical rules, and memorizing word lists. This role paid no attention to the importance of context except when needing help to explain the translation. As a reaction to this method, the Direct Method emerged, with an emphasis on teaching spoken language through visuals, exclusive use of the target language, and inductive teaching where students are expected to subconsciously learn and guess meaning of rules within context. The Audiolingual Method (ALM), soon followed, bringing a new emphasis to listening and speaking. It advocated the teaching of oral skills by repetition, dialogue memorization, and manipulation of grammatical pattern drills. Because of this, speaking in the ALM manner typically meant teacher repetition, recited memorized dialogue, or grammatical drills (Shrum & Glisan, 2009). While there is a definite lack of context in such drills, many teachers today still use ALM-based teaching strategies. The cognitive approaches, proposed in the 1960s were based largely on Chomsky's

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claims that “an individual’s linguistic knowledge does not reflect conditioned behavior but rather the ability to create an infinite number of novel responses” (Shrum & Glisan, 2009, p. 48). In the 1970s, the focus shifted to a communicative approach to teaching language, attending to situations that students might face outside of the classroom (Shrum & Glisan, 2009). Savignon (1997) stated that “the development of the learner’s communicative abilities is seen to depend not so much on the time they spend rehearsing grammatical patterns as on the opportunities they are given to interpret, to express, and to negotiate meaning in real-life situations” (p. xi). This approach suggested appealing topics, a functional treatment of grammar, and a focus on communication with the omission of a concern of acute accuracy in the beginning stages.

Since then several methods have developed that reflect many of Savignon’s ideas, the most original – the Total Physical Response model - being frequently used as a vocabulary instructional model. The Total Physical Response Method (TPR) by Asher, Kusudo, and de la Torre uses activities centralized on the learner’s kinesthetic-sensory system. It is based on the way which children naturally acquire vocabulary in their native language and has been proven very effective in the acquisition and retention of vocabulary over long periods (Shrum & Glisan, 2009).

The history of this topic demonstrates a debate about how rules of language are acquired by an individual. This debate sparked scholar Dan Slobin (1973) to complete an investigation of over forty languages to uncover how children really do acquire language and the rules that come with it. Slobin (1973) suggested that children apply a number of operating principles to language, which influences the order that grammar and structures are learned; they look for systems and modify structures based on these systems, providing a transparent relation between grammatical markers and underlying semantic distinctions. An example of this would be the systematic use of

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adding –s or –es to make nouns plural in the English language. Children over use this inherent system, which often times takes years to override and correct (Slobin, 1973). Clark and Clark (1977) argue that eight or ten years is probably an underestimate of the time children require to master the structures of their first language (Slobin, 1973).

A sequence by which students learn and acquire the rules of language is suggested by Berman (1986). This sequence can be used in a similar manner for second language learning. The sequence starts out with rote knowledge – an initial acquisition of items which is pre-grammatical and context bound – followed by early modifications, interim schemata (over-regularization and overextension), rule knowledge, and end state usage (Berman, 1986). As students work through this sequence practice opportunities must be presented. When we think of how we acquire language as a child, we are able to practice grammar rules in a variety of real-life contexts. Similarly, second language learners should work through this sequence with practice options that provide context. Guidelines are provided that can be used when providing contextualized grammar practice. Practice should present cues like those that will be used later (it should reflect linguistic realities as well as contextual realities), students should practice the rules in the largest variety of situations as possible, and students will be more likely to learn when their response is part of a larger challenge (Grauberg, 1997). In all of the acquisition steps and practice suggestions, context is key. In no case do we see that verb grids or explanations are helpful in the teaching of grammar. Instead, we see repeatedly that the use of the grammar in an authentic situations assists in the understanding of how the structure should be used.

Design Communicative Activities

The ACTFL also recognizes the importance of aligned design in communicative activities, with an emphasis on such activities as it provides practice and realistic opportunities

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for students to use what they are learning. This topic has come a long ways since the late 1960s, when traditional approaches to communication in the foreign language classroom gave priority to grammatical competence, as seen above. This method is known as a deductive method – students are being presented with rules and are then given opportunities to practice those rules. The opposite of this method is the inductive method – students are given example situations with the rules and are expected to work through the rule themselves. This deductive method of communication is known as ALM, which has been mentioned previously in the topic of grammatical context. Soon after, the P-P-P cycle was commonly employed, encouraging a presentation of skills, practice of skills, followed by production of such. This structure has been widely used in foreign language classrooms and continues to be used by many in classrooms today (Shrum & Glisan, 2009). This format has been used for years; however, Skehan (1998) more recently criticizes the practice, saying that automatization – that learners will learn what is taught in the order in which it is taught – is no longer credible in linguistics of psychology. (Shrum & Glisan, 2009). Under the new theory of communicative linguistics teaching (CLT), grammar-focused methods such as P-P-P have dissolved, giving way to functional and skills-based teaching. In addition, accuracy activities such as drill and grammar practice have been replaced by interactive, small group activities that emphasize fluency (Shrum & Glisan, 2009).

In the 1970s, new approaches emerged as those traditional ones became less popular. In this era, attention was shifted to the knowledge and skills needed to use language appropriately for different communicative purposes, arising a need for communicative competence instead of grammatical competence. Teachers became very excited about this new method of teaching foreign languages, and dove into the re-creation of syllabuses, structures, activities, etc. This method soon advocated functional syllabuses, native language for specific purposes, and

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tolerance of errors. This method also encouraged participants to make real communication the focus of learning, provide opportunities for learners to experiment with what they know as well as opportunities to develop accuracy and fluency, link the different skills together, and let students discover grammar rules (Shrum & Glisan, 2009).

Since the creation of CLT, ten core assumptions have been made in regards to the practice. These assumptions deal with language being meaningful, applicable, student-centered, differentiated, and the learning experience being a holistic process with an environment of collaboration (Richards, 2006). It is difficult for effective communicative activities to take place if one of these elements is not in place. If we were to not create an environment that is conducive to collaboration, it is nearly impossible for communicative activities to take place, as students are not comfortable completing such activities in an environment where they might not feel safe.

Backward Design

One of the most important elements for teachers in any content area is to design instruction with purpose. More recent approaches, known as backward design or top-down, begin with a focus on the end results desired. These results may be for the entire program, a particular level of study, a unit, or even daily lesson plans. The scale to which the design applies does not matter, as long as the result is the center. In backward design planning, the desired end result drives the creation of unit and lesson plans and assessment (Shrum & Glisan, 2009).

There are three stages of backward design: 1) identify desired results, 2) determine acceptable evidence, and 3) plan learning experiences and instruction. This model contrasts very differently from a more traditional approach to planning, being a model that is centered on the textbook or specific lesson activities. In the first stage, teachers decide on the desired results of instruction as far as what the students should know, understand, and be able to do (Wiggins &

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McTighe, 2005). Wiggins and McTighe (2005) suggest that teachers identify “understandings” that the students should gain in line with the “essential questions” that students will be able to answer by the end of each instructional unit. They encourage educators to plan around “big ideas” – concepts, themes, or issues that give “meaning and connection to discrete facts and skills” and that hold relevance beyond the four walls of school (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 5). Completing such design involves examining goals, standards at the district, state, and national levels, and district foreign language curriculum.

Following stage one, stage two involves teachers determining the evidence needed that will support that the big ideas have been obtained. Such evidence can be collected in several ways formally and informally and does not necessarily have to be through a single end-of-instruction test or task (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Finally, in the last stage, teachers plan the experiences and activities in which the students will engage in order to achieve the desired end results. Elements of stage three include specific teaching methods, sequencing of lessons, and materials used (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

Other scholars have suggested additions or alternatives to the creation of instructional units. Egan (1986) suggested that teachers are able to design curriculum and lessons using characteristics of a good story. This is not to say that stories specifically should be used in every lesson, but that the instruction should reflect the elements of a story told rather than individual skills or objectives to be mastered – a clear beginning that motivates and engages the learner, a middle that encourages participation and works toward the lesson goal, and an ending in which the students use the beginning and middle to produce an outcome, solution, resolution, or achievement of the goal (Curtain & Dahlaber, 2010). This type of design very much resembles

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what is more recently known as Project-Based Learning – structuring the unit around tasks that lead to a culminating activity.

Appropriate Feedback

Considered by many a best practice in all areas of education, appropriate feedback concludes the ACTFL's core effective practices. Second language teachers must provide students with feedback that is corrective, timely, and focused on criteria. They must also involve students in the feedback process. Dean, Hubbell, Pitler, and Stone (2012) elicit four recommendations for the practice of providing appropriate feedback: 1) provide feedback that addresses what is correct and elaborates on what students need to do next, 2) provide feedback appropriately in time to meet students' needs, 3) provide feedback that is criterion referenced, and 4) engage students in the feedback process.

If teachers are looking for students to achieve specific goals through our backward design, effective feedback must be in place. The figure below illustrates the findings from several synthesis studies in regards to the importance of the topic (Marzano, 2003, p. 36):

Research on the Importance of Feedback

Synthesis Study	Number of Effect Sizes	Average Effect Size	Percentile Gain
Walberg, 1999	20	0.94	33
Bloom, 1976	7	0.54	21
Scheerens & Bosker, 1997	—	1.09	36
Kumar, 1991	5	1.35	41
Haller, Child, & Walberg, 1988	20	0.71	26

Figure 1. Research on the Importance of Feedback

This account reports the impact of feedback ranging from a low of a gain of 21 percentile points to a high of 41, both indicating higher academic achievement in classes where students and

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teachers utilize effective feedback than in those classes where it is not used. Furthermore, a review of almost 8,000 studies by John Hattie led him to the conclusion that “the most powerful single modification that enhances achievement is feedback. The simplest prescription for improving education must be ‘dollops of feedback’” (Shrum & Glisan, 2009, p. 9).

Despite Hattie’s optimism on such a subject, feedback must have certain characteristics. Bangert-Drowns, Kulik, Kulik and Morgan (1991) support Shrum and Glisan (2009) by saying feedback must be timely via formative assessments and must be completed regularly throughout the learning process and also must be specific to the content being learned. In regards to a second language classroom, this means providing several means of feedback, most specifically, verbal feedback and modeling so as to utilize the target language as frequently as possible.

Themes in the Literature

Throughout the literature, we see several connections. Feedback ties into target language use and backward design, communicative activities must utilize the language as well as provide opportunities to learn grammar in context using authentic materials. The core effective practices listed by the ACTFL are interconnected, and furthermore, are supported not only in the foreign language classroom, but several may be considered best practices in education in general. First, the majority of the language used in the classroom should be in the second language. Next, authentic materials should be used; the conflict exists in which materials and addressing the difficulty of such materials. In addition, verb drills and simple repetition is a thing of the past; grammar needs to be learned and used in appropriate contexts within the language itself. Communicative activities need to be more than repetition, with an emphasis on variability. Instructional design begins with an end goal in mind with activities, tasks, and experiences

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conducted in relation to that goal. Finally, feedback must be timely and content oriented in order for it to be effective and have meaning.

Opposing Viewpoints and Conflicts

In addition to the disputes throughout each core effective practice, there are several viewpoints about what is to be considered “best practices” in second language learning. Because of a lack of information and research dedicated to the subject, many districts are left to create their own standards and practices and often times become very isolated. In addition to the practices listed by the ACTFL, one other national organization has listed several practices, which they believe to be best for second language learning. The NADSFL has identified the many of the same best practices for second language learning classrooms as the ACTFL as well as several general classroom management practices such as high expectations, student-centered classroom, risk-taking, use of formative assessments, use of Bloom’s taxonomy thinking skills, instruction around diverse learning styles, and the use of technology (NADSFL, 1999).

Several of these practices are the same as what are listed by the ACTFL, however, there are several that have been added such as that addressing technology, learning styles, and learning environment. It is evident that many of these practices are supported by several entities, but see a dispute between quantity and variability of what may be considered a best practice.

Impact on Students, Teachers, and Districts

Foreign language classrooms are often a forgotten area since no district is required to adopt a certain set of standards. In fact, several districts are left to create their own standards, and often times are not held to those local standards let alone the national standards. The impact of this fact is that students often are not prepared to face the authentic situations of the real world in

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regards to the second language. There also lacks a consistency from district to district and classroom to classroom in regards to how the subject is taught.

The availability of these core effective practices AND the distribution of such should assist these problems significantly. Teachers and districts need to be informed on such content-specific practices and actually utilize them instead of simply being aware that they exist. They must transform their instruction and curriculum to ensure that they are not simply getting caught in the web of a textbook, but transforming that textbook into one resource that is a support in their practices.

Several teachers utilize several of these practices, but all too often, we miss out on one or two of the practices. Engaging in all core effective practices for second language learning can motivate our students, help them to achieve at a higher level, and challenge them in ways we might not have otherwise imagined.

Areas of Future Research

Because of this review, several questions come to mind. The research on such a topic is still vague; however, trends have been identified in the literature. These trends more often than not are apparent in second language learning classrooms as well as other general education content areas. Although these ideas can be supported in most classrooms, the reality is that too many teachers do not engage in the application of these practices, that educators are caught in the textbook and loyal to verb drills. Furthermore, a disagreement seems to have risen in regards to how a second language is acquired. "Can the process by which L2 is learnt be compared at all with the process of L1 acquisition? Or do the greater cognitive maturity of L2 learners and the fewer and less motivating opportunities for contact with the foreign language inherent in school

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learning make the conditions for learning so different that the two processes cannot be compared” (Grauberg, 1997, p. 58)?

Conclusion

Best practices are a must for all teachers to educate students effectively and efficiently. Although the best practices for second language learning are fairly relative, all foreign language teachers must look at the research available and make educated decisions about how to engage in instruction. The above six core effective practices – target language use, context-based grammar, appropriate feedback, communicative activities, backwards design, and authentic material usage – are available to instructors to help guide their practice. With this availability comes responsibility, though, as foreign language educators must now all implement this information to classroom practice to become the best learning resource possible to all students.

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