

Are We Practicing What We Preach?

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Since the International Language Institute of MA (ILI) opened in 1984, the modus operandi in the classroom has been integrating activities. Instead of assigning one specific activity to each skill area, we take one activity and stretch it (without stretching the point too much) to include all the skill areas. For example, instead of focusing just on the speaking/listening skills by having learners discuss a topic, we expand the activity to include a reading and a writing activity connected to that topic. This way of approaching language teaching allows learners to focus on the whole picture rather than a series of disconnected activities practicing the different skill areas; it appears that our learners learn better this way. Watching an entire program instead of channel surfing with a remote allows you to see the whole picture in context rather than snippets. How can we evaluate (as teachers and administrators) whether we are actually integrating activities in the classroom and then reflect on its benefits?

It is important that we understand how integrating activities is connected to the theoretical way we look at language. Being that we are language teachers, what better way to demonstrate this idea than with a visual? At ILI, we use the “The Wheel of Concepts of Language” to show how the areas of language are connected (see Figure 1).

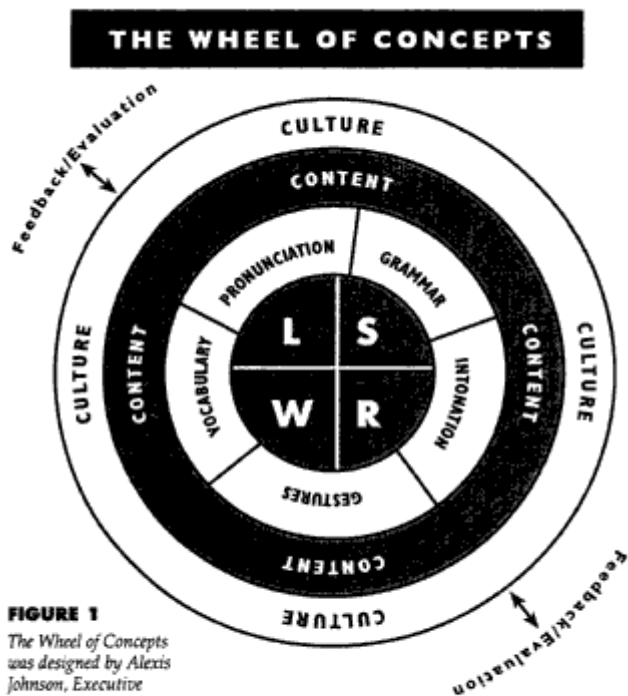


FIGURE 1
The Wheel of Concepts was designed by Alexis Johnson, Executive Director of ILI. It can also be found in the Commonwealth Literacy Corps Volunteer Tutor Training Manual.

The wheel is used because of the idea of moveable parts. In the center of the wheel are the core skill areas of communication. (In cultures where language is simply an oral tradition, there are two main areas of communication: listening and speaking. Since English has both an oral and written tradition, we refer to the four skill areas listed above) Outside and connected to the core of the wheel are the tools, or other concepts of language. These tools play a role in the learners' development and strengthening of the skill areas, and his/her overall ability to communicate. As one moves out from the center of the wheel, each section moves about to mix and match with each other, and can do so simultaneously. For example, a speaking activity may work on pronunciation, grammar, intonation, and culture all at the same time.

At ILI, the Course Progress Report we use is connected to the Wheel of Concepts. The Course Progress Report shows how our classes are structured, documents what is covered in the class and clarifies how classes are integrated.

A checklist is part of the Course Progress Report and mirrors the Wheel of Concepts. At the end of each class, teachers review the course progress sheet and check off which areas have been covered. This checklist allows teachers to see if they are integrating activities, which skill area needs more attention, and if they are spending too much time on one skill area and not enough time on the others.

Course Progress Report

The Course Progress Report includes lots of space for teachers' notes. Teachers decide how this is used and have used the space to jot down how the activity worked (or didn't) along with ideas for future activities, for documenting suggestions from learners that came up during feedback, and as a teachers' journal and an instrument for teacher reflection at the end of each class.

At ILI we strive to have students speaking 60%-80% of the time. At the bottom of the Course Progress Report is the question "Are students speaking 60-80% of the time?" to help teachers remember that our focus is getting learners to speak.

Also at the bottom of each Course Progress Report is a series of reflective questions for teachers to ask to get feedback about the class. What activities/skills did we cover? What did you learn from these activities? Would you have changed? What would you like to see in the next class? The arrows to and from Evaluation/Feedback on the Wheel of Concepts demonstrate the connection between what is going on in class and the importance of feedback and evaluation as part of the structure of the class. Teachers and learners alike need to understand why these questions are being asked and that the information retrieved from these questions is being used to drive the curriculum. Therefore, feedback from learners needs to be highlighted in a way that shows learners that we are listening. This is an important step in getting learners to understand that they must take on the responsibility for their own learning.

We rely heavily on oral feedback at the end of each class. Often new teachers run out of time and when asked after class if they have done feedback, the answer is "No, but I'll be sure to do it tomorrow." Having the questions on the Course Progress Report helps teachers remember that these questions need to be asked consistently so that students continue to

drive the curriculum. We also include a check-off area under evaluation on the Course Progress Report to ensure that it has been done.

We spend a lot of time at ILI talking about evaluation/assessment and making sure that doing feedback at the end of the class is not just an "add on" activity, but something the students see consistently and which becomes part of the class. The feedback section of the class could also be an integrated activity: in pairs, learners talk about the activities and their feelings about the class/their progress. This is written down either by the student or the pair and is then shared with other students in the class. Getting feedback from the students in this way helps them practice their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills.

Assessment is an on-going process and we know that we all need constant work on how we handle assessment in the class. Reviewing the Wheel of Concepts and how we use our Course Progress Reports is part of ILI's staff development. As suggested by teachers in a recent workshop, we are also going to include the Wheel of Concepts in the student handbook as a way of informing learners what is going on in the class. The Wheel of Concepts started out as being just for teachers, but we realize that having this available to learners will enable them to see how/why we structure our classes the way we do and the importance we put on learner feedback and integrating all skill areas. It will also keep us honest as to making sure that we practice what we preach.