



## Foreign Language Module **Designing Inclusive Classrooms—Getting Started**

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**F**ostering a pedagogical environment that recognizes and welcomes the growing diversity of student abilities begins, like any other pedagogy, well before the first day of class. The textbook, the pacing, the arrangement of the student desks—even the format of the syllabus—all contribute in ways both big and small to a student’s learning experience. As instructors become more and more aware of potential barriers faced by students with disabilities, the typical tasks of setting up a foreign language course will naturally take on a new ethos of inclusion.

Happily, folding an inclusive ethos into an existing course frequently entails relatively simple refinements. In this module, we look at specific strategies that can be incorporated very early in the term to increase the accessibility of a course. These strategies are arranged in two parts: (1) those that can be designed before the class first meets, in anticipation of actual students yet unknown; and (2) those that can be integrated during the first week of instruction when feedback from real students is possible. All of these strategies reflect methods used to promote the 5 C’s of ACTFL’s Standards for Foreign Language Learning (2006), as well as several principles of Universal Design for Instruction (Scott, McGuire, & Shaw 2002). In particular, these strategies promote well-designed instruction that is inclusive and hospitable, and endorse frequent interaction and communication among students as well as between students and instructors.

### Anticipating the first day of class

**1. Include a disability statement in the syllabus.** Perhaps the simplest way to convey an inclusive attitude toward students with disabilities is to provide a prominent disability statement in the course syllabus. Even a short, single-sentence statement that addresses the needs of students with disabilities will telegraph an awareness of diversity and a concern for individual circumstances that can go a long way in establishing a welcoming climate. Staff at the Disability

Services office may suggest language specific to each campus, but one possible statement is the following:

*If you have a disability and require accommodations, please meet with the instructor this week to discuss your learning needs. If you wish to request reasonable accommodations, such as extended time for tests or note taking support, please register with the Office of Disability Services as soon as possible. All information will be kept confidential.*

Such a statement can be a lifeboat for many different kinds of students, including those new to the challenges of college-level foreign language courses, those who may have been assigned Individual Education Plans (IEPs) in high school that exempted them from unmodified modern language courses, those who are hesitant to disclose a diagnosed disability, those undiagnosed students who have always wondered about their capacity to learn a foreign language, or those who—fully aware of their learning needs and previous accommodations—merely need to know that the instructor, in a sense, “speaks the language of disabilities.”

**2. Familiarize yourself with the basic disability resources available on campus.** When a student—invited by the disability statement on the syllabus—approaches you to discuss accommodations or supports, do you know what to say? Preparing for some anticipated questions may help reassure students for whom foreign language courses have often presented ongoing challenges.

- Where is the Office of Disability Services located?
- How does the student go about arranging accommodations for the class?
- What is the campus policy regarding modifications, substitutions, or waivers?
- How can the student contact a tutor?
- How much independence do you have as the instructor to grant unofficial modifications to the course?
- How would you respond to students without a diagnosed disability who confide that they have always struggled in foreign language classes?

**3. Design an inclusive syllabus.** An inclusive syllabus is one that is available in multiple formats, both online and on paper, so that students have some flexibility in how they keep track of the course. The syllabus should be easy to read, both in terms of font size and content, and should maintain a consistent appearance and unified voice. Tables or charts that summarize information and break up long sections of narration can be particularly useful. Design professionals often stress that visual documents comprised of multiple fonts, haphazard spacing, disorganized sections, or inconsistent emphasis—such as frequent bolding or phrases in all caps—tend to make information difficult to decode and retain. While all course requirements and student obligations should be clearly detailed on the first day of class, a syllabus that is overwhelmingly thorough may, on closer inspection, simply be overwhelming. Consider a basic syllabus to review on the first day of class, to be followed-up with more specific details in future

weeks of the course. Aside from being easier for students to process, a basic syllabus that requires additional details provides for periodic, built-in conversations about both the mechanics of the course and the expectations of the instructor.

### During the first week of instruction

1. **Get to know your students as individuals** by planning activities that require students to talk about themselves. Not only do such activities personalize the target language and facilitate fluency, they also make language meaningful, set the tone for a communicative environment, help introduce students to one other, and lower their affective filter. Such engagement also conveys an important awareness that each student brings specific needs to the classroom. As Marshall Gregory notes, “the classroom world in which teachers think of themselves as primarily teaching *students* is a different classroom world from the one in which teachers think of themselves as primarily teaching *disciplines*” (p. 123, emphasis added). This is a vital distinction to make, particularly at the start of the term when inclusive classroom chemistry is developing. When the instructor participates fully in opening-day activities, divulging the same personal information asked of the students, he or she demonstrates a candidness that students find critical to learning. In extended personal interviews, we’ve found that a comfortable connection with the instructor plays a key role in the learning of students with disabilities.

Exercises to assist with this process of initiation do not need to be lengthy or complicated. Instructors might ask students to complete an index card on the first day of class with their name, contact information, and a response to an ice-breaking question. (They might be asked about a movie they saw recently or what hidden talents they possess.) At Longwood, we’ve had recent success using a modified Foreign Language Autobiography that asks students to recognize their own strengths and weakness, to discuss their preference for teaching styles, and to reflect on their experiences as a foreign language learner. A particularly constructive section of the Autobiography asks students to complete this sentence: “For me, foreign language is like....” Other common activities include a bingo-style scavenger hunt, or a short list of “Find someone who...” statements. The point here is to set the tone for the semester with simple and intuitive ice-breaking opportunities that promote habitual, low-stakes interaction.

2. **Verify the correct placement of students.** Placement procedures vary widely across campuses. Some institutions conduct an online exam to gauge a student’s linguistic background and abilities; some assess students through individual oral interviews; others ask students to submit writing samples; still others rely on grades from high school transcripts. In many institutions, the instructor is not involved in registering students for the course, and must assume that the course is pitched at the appropriate level for those enrolled. Whatever method is used, whether a student learning autobiography, a placement test, an entrance interview, or some other diagnostic instrument, it is worthwhile during the first week of class to assure that each student has enrolled in a course commensurate with his or her abilities and experience. Sometimes a

barrier to learning is simple to eliminate. If a student with the abilities of a novice lands in an intermediate-level course, for instance, removing the barrier is as simple as enrolling the student in a more suitable course.

3. **Walk students through the textbook design** to show them how it is organized and how it will be used during the semester. Are some sections more vital than others? Is a vocabulary bank included at the end of each section, or are new words integrated contextually? Will the class encounter every reading passage and every cultural explanation, or will certain excerpts be highlighted? During the first week of the term, a visually stimulating, highly detailed foreign language textbook may be taxing to certain students, most of whom are expected to decipher new texts and requirements for other courses simultaneously. Discussing and decoding the lay-out of the text can help students understand how to anticipate the rhythm of the course, how to pinpoint important topics, and how to connect the text with the syllabus. For instance, “As noted in the syllabus, a vocabulary quiz will occur every Monday; the vital expressions are always found in the blue boxes on the first page of every chapter.” Such an exercise in “textbook translation” helps ensure that essential information is perceptible to the student, further contributing to an ethos of inclusion.

4. **Use the target language from the very first day.** All students will come to the class wondering how they will fit in linguistically. Several students with disabilities mentioned this anxiety when we interviewed them. Marc said: “Even with English...I tend to be a little slower on the oral comprehension. I’m not very articulate.” Melissa, worried about her fluency in Spanish, remarked that it “can be unnerving to have someone [in class] who really can speak it.” Samantha said, “I get very nervous when I have to speak in English in front of anyone, so in Spanish it’s a little more difficult because I’m not perfect at it.” This anxiety, hardly unique to students with disabilities, ought to be addressed as early as possible.

Using the target language from the very first day accomplishes two important tasks: it furnishes students immediate feedback about key speaking and listening skills, and it provides an occasion for the entire class to discuss the expectations for the semester ahead. Researchers such as Horwitz, Kern, and Levine have noted that students and instructors often start a class with conflicting expectations concerning foreign language learning. Alan Brown describes an increasing “need for teachers and students to become aware of their notions of effective L2 learning and to communicate openly about them” (48). When students are expected to engage in the target language from the very beginning of the course, it implicitly confronts two questions that most students have in mind: “How do I measure up to the other students in the class?” and “How much of the target language am I expected to encounter?” A useful way to end the first day of class is to discuss these questions head-on. A 5-minute conversation about the importance of using the target language—including strategies for student improvement and assurances that fluency is not expected—will establish high expectations while demonstrating an awareness of student anxiety and concern.

**5. Provide a list of useful classroom expressions in the target language.** One common way to minimize target language barriers is to provide students with a list of practical classroom expressions, such as “How does one say XYZ in Spanish?” or “What page are we on?” These lists are frequently included on the inside cover of some textbooks and could be displayed prominently at the front of the classroom or made into a bookmark. Aside from the practical support of these lists, and the respect for the target language they instill, they can also be used to infuse a classroom with a genial personality. What should students say when someone sneezes? What should they say when they arrive late to class? How would students say “I brought you a delicious mocha grande” or “French is my favorite class”? This list could also be flexible and personalized, with new expressions added every week. (See the module on Target Language for a more detailed discussion of considerations in target language use.)

### References

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