

Why DIY Language?

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We have been piloting a new type of language class, or maybe it's a linguistics class, or perhaps it's more like a unit in IB's theory of knowledge, but then again, not really ...

It's hard to put DIY Language in a cubbyhole because it's not your average classroom activity.¹ First what it's not: It's not a typical foreign language class, teaching students to communicate in a specific language. It's about languages - as many of them as we, the students and teachers, can usefully bring into the conversation. It's not really a grammar class, although we discuss how different languages handle different needs in their unique way. It's also not a linguistics class, though of course linguistic terms and big ideas come into play along the way.

It's hard to put our new DIY Language course in a cubbyhole

So what *is* it? It's definitely a class in constructing a new language. This makes it unique, because New Language 101 is rarely part of the middle or high school curriculum. It's mental gymnastics, which is good for something. It's also an exercise in reimagining how we set up curriculum.

Project Based Learning

Let's look at the approach first, which will be familiar to most everyone as a type of project based learning. Then we'll dive into DIY Language specifically.

Instead of a static curriculum organized around a list of common introductory topics in grammar and linguistics, from which the teacher then devises activities, our dynamic curriculum is organized around an activity with a final product, a grammar and lexicon of a new language that allows students to perform a skit in a new language. The process of working on the project will lead us to some common introductory topics in grammar and linguistics.

We're calling the two approaches the "List of topics" and "Make this." Picture these approaches like in Table 1.

¹ DIY Language is currently an after school activity, serving as a pilot for the five week class it will be in school year 2017-2018.



TABLE 1: Comparing two approaches to curriculum

List of topics	Make this
1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. <i>etcetera</i>	2. 8. 3. 2 4. 9. <i>etcetera</i>

In the “List of topics” approach, care has been taken to arrange the topics in a logical order. In addition to the order of the topics, the syllabus likely suggests the number of days for each topic. Teachers devise interesting activities for each topic. Assessment may be after each topic or a group of topics. Teachers and administrators can be fairly sure that the list of topics will all be introduced and worked on, save perhaps for the ones at the bottom of the list if time runs out in the school calendar.

In the “Make this” approach, the students work on their project, which is the creation of something new, in this case a language that is robust enough to use in a skit. The teachers give the students the necessary direction and resources to create a language, solving the individual problems (e.g. how should pronouns work, how do we tell if something happened yesterday or is going to happen tomorrow?) as they go. Some of the topics from the “List of topics” approach will come up and need teacher guidance to address, but not in an order the teacher can predict. Not all of the topics from the “List of topics” approach will come up, but there’s a real chance that some topics *not addressed* in the “List of topics” do come up. Most importantly, the topics that do come up arise just at the point when it makes sense to talk about them because knowledge about them is needed, right then and there. There’s motivation to figure something out because it helps in solving a problem.

Here are some important contrasts in the approaches:

Organizational focus - cover these	Organizational focus - make this
Prescribed coverage of topics	Treatment of topics as they arise
Curriculum presentation is concrete, with discrete points	Curriculum presentation feels fuzzy, with focus on process and “possible” topics.
Confidence that a prescribed set of topics will be covered.	Confidence that the (somewhat unpredictable) topics that are covered get attention when the context requires them.



Relatively easy ability to assess	Could be tricky to assess
Relatively easy to plan the topics ahead of time, but perhaps more difficult to supply context and motivation.	Difficult to plan the topics ahead of time, but easier to treat the topics when context and motivation is (arguably) higher.
Logical formative assessment includes quizzes on the topics.	Logical formative assessment includes observing the state of the project.
Logical final products are often tests or papers, perhaps student presentations	Logical final product is sharing the final product of the project.

It's tempting to add "more fun" to the right hand column above, but we realize we have to be careful with that opinion. Teachers and students who feel a bit at sea with the "make this" approach probably won't describe it as more fun. And good teaching makes learning fun (at least in the sense of rewarding, satisfying) in any of a variety of approaches.

You might say that this particular project based learning we are leading is a curriculum of product, which requires thinking about topics, as opposed to a curriculum of topics, for which we develop activities. Our treatment of topics is in a sense "just in time" treatment. Our curriculum is a discussion to be had - we just don't know exactly what the discussion will be, or when.

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Let's put this into context with how we have developed the DIY Language class.

DIY Language

Do it yourself (DIY) is currently hip as part of the general maker movement. We wonder with this class if we are caught up in yet another educational fad, or are we perhaps onto something a bit bigger? With luck we're experiencing a combination of the two (the fad ain't necessarily bad ...).

The elevator introduction to the course is this:

Students use their language expertise (most of our students are bilingual at the minimum) to find the easiest grammatical system for the parts of language they feel they need to construct in order to put together a skit in the new language. They work agilely² in groups of four and record their decisions in two Google docs common to all of them: (1) a summary of the grammar rules they create (and from what natural languages they may have borrowed from) and (2) a dictionary of the words they create (with reference to origins). Along the way they get some

² See this publication for a brief introduction to agile.



practice with Esperanto, the most successful constructed language, using the free Duolingo application. At the end of the course, students perform the skit for other students not in the same class.

Here is how we have answered a few of the questions from our own LAS middle school curriculum guide.

How will the course require active participation, experiential learning, and individual student initiative?

- Group work, group presentations, debates (regarding topics arising from student work and about existing constructed languages), and group skit performances will support active learning.
- Writing and editing of the “language textbook” with vocabulary and grammar rules, plus work on Duolingo in Esperanto, will highlight individual student initiative in the group project.

How will the teacher know how much the students are learning day to day? week to week?

- Students in groups will display their work on the group Agile canvas.
- Student presentations and debates in support (or not) of specific language rules will demonstrate how informed they are.
- Weekly quick, informal formative feedback by Post-It question regarding learning and course content.
- Duolingo Classroom tracks all progress for individual students.

How will the teacher allow students who complete work deemed “not yet” (below a B) to revise until they arrive at “satisfactory” (A or B)?

The format of the class will rely largely on group work (managed “agilely”) with a series of group check-ins with the teacher(s) to determine if the work is satisfactory, including spot checking that all members of the group understand the group’s product. Groups that have not completed work satisfactorily (the “not yet” work) or groups that have members that don’t understand the group work, will need to revisit their work and be assessed as a group a second (or third ...) time.

Specific targets will be created for weekly progress in Esperanto, which can be done outside of class.

Which attribute of the learner profile will the teacher likely choose to assess? Why is that attribute a good fit?

Creative - Students are being asked to create their own constructed language and to write and perform skits for a wider audience in that language.



General Teaching and Learning Resources

What set of national or international standards or other professional documentation will serve as the starting point (or an anchor) for the curriculum? Please justify.

From the MYP and how it feeds into DP:

“The MYP language B course aims to encourage the student to develop a respect for and understanding of other languages and cultures, and is equally designed to equip the student with a skills base to facilitate further language learning.”

ACTFL Standards. Communication, Cultures, Connections, **Comparisons**, Communities.

“Through comparisons and contrasts with the language being studied, students develop insight into the nature of language and the concept of culture and realize that there are multiple ways of viewing the world.”

Standard 4.1: Students demonstrate understanding of the nature of language through comparisons of the language studied and their own.

The Paderborner Method, Universität Paderborn

We are very loosely playing on the idea from the Universität Paderborn that learning Esperanto before another language facilitates second language development.

How does the structure of the curriculum assure accessibility for all students?

- Experience learning a constructed language is (within parameters) individualized and at students own pace.
- Decisions regarding the constructed language the class builds will be based on group consensus, following examples by students in their native languages (to help beginning ESL students)
- Student skits will contain multiple roles that can be rehearsed ahead of time and adjusted for level of ability. Working in constructed language will level the playing field between native and non-native speakers of English.

What are some samples of teaching and learning resources?

- Esperanto course, Duolingo (free, online)
- Duolingo Classroom (management system for teachers, free, online)
- Agile Mindset - to guide students in flexible working groups
- Language Awareness (iBook, written by LAS students, 2015)
- [Toki Pona](#) - an invented language of 120 base words and 10 grammatical rules made to be as easy as possible - this can be a good guide for the teacher to use



when making decisions about what questions students will answer about their highly simplified language.

- [The Language Construction Kit](#) - a how to guide.
- [The Art of Language Invention](#) - an in depth guide by the creator of languages for Game of Thrones and other shows.
- And [In the Land of Invented Languages](#) - a really fun read about the crazy lengths people will go to in order to make a new language.

Summary

We believe we are developing a course that is fun and creative and, in a unique way, is a backdoor into the study of linguistics. Our pilot activity in Fall 2017, to date, has created the beginning of a vocabulary drawn from Catalan, Italian, English, Persian, and more with grammar from Chinese and other languages - and plenty of words and rules of our own invention.

Our own invented rules led to the name of the language, *blasa*. We got there by taking the verb *blas* (meaning “to talk,” derived from *blah blah* in English - that’s a pretty great verb for talking) and then adding the suffix *-a* which turns any verb into a noun.

I write *blasa* without a capital letter, though we haven’t discussed capitalization rules yet. Perhaps if you ever run across our new language it will be spelled *Blasa*, not *blasa*, but that remains to be seen, because our pilot group gets the say! ***Blastu blasa?***³

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³ It turns out that we do capitalize Blasa. ;-)

