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Curriculum Standards in the Foreign Languages

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One way to gain a conceptual understanding of the standards for foreign languages is to examine the political and social changes that surrounded their development. This article provides a summary of the current national standards for foreign languages and a social and political account of how and why they were developed. The authors describe the major social and political changes that have directly affected the foreign language curriculum, and then they summarize what the standards are while highlighting the points that most clearly reflect these social and political changes.

A Brief History of the Foreign Language Curriculum

The history of the foreign language curriculum has been one of general neglect. Since foreign languages have not been considered part of the core curriculum, little attention has been given to determining what the curriculum should include, how it should be taught and how it could be assessed.

One of the earliest exceptions to this statement occurred in 1898 with the formation of the Committee of Ten. The Committee of Ten was formed in reaction to the rapidly increasing number of students in the nation's secondary schools. The committee members questioned the appropriateness of the classical curriculum for addressing the needs of the larger and more economically and socially diverse student population. Of particular interest was the committee's emphasis on foreign language learning. They viewed foreign language learning as both an intellectual exercise, and as a means for enhancing students' general verbal abilities. Finally, the committee also believed that foreign language learning would serve a national purpose by facilitating the understanding of German science. However, as the United States became increasingly industrialized the committee's pedagogical views were abandoned, along with their emphasis on foreign languages (Davis, 1997).

The next significant landmark in U.S. foreign language curriculum history was 1955 when the federal government officially authorized the study of foreign languages under title VI of the National Defense Education Act. This act translated into federal funding for foreign language curriculum development. However, foreign language was still a neglected area and student enrollment in foreign language classrooms throughout the 1950's was at an all-time low (Davis, 1997).

The 1975 Helsinki accords marked a turning point for U.S. foreign language curriculum. Under these accords, the U.S. made an international promise to promote foreign language learning. President Ford commissioned a committee to investigate the quality of foreign language and international studies in the nation. The committee's conclusions were published in a report entitled, "Strength Through Wisdom," in which they declared that the nation's foreign language learning was "nothing short of scandalous" (Dutcher, 1996; Zimmer-Leow, 1991).

This report sparked unprecedented national awareness for foreign language learning. As a consequence national and state foreign language organizations devised initiatives to improve the curricu-

lum. The largest and most influential of these organizations was the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL).

The members of ACTFL represent a variety of foreign language professionals across the nation, including teachers, administrators and researchers. All members share the vision that Americans should be proficient in at least two languages and that all students can be successful language and culture learners. The mission of the organization is to “promote and foster studies of languages” by creating policy and programs for foreign language professionals (Lafayette and Draper, 1996).

One of the greatest contributions of this organization was the development of the “Proficiency Guidelines.” These guidelines were developed in a joint effort with Educational Testing Services (ETS) and were designed to provide educators with a common yardstick for measuring students’ linguistic proficiency (Davis, 1997).

The proficiency guidelines are of particular significance because they reflect the major paradigmatic shift in foreign language pedagogy that occurred in the 1980’s and is continuing to develop today. This new pedagogy is known as the “Proficiency Paradigm.” This shift occurred as a reaction to the curricular thinking and the teaching methods of the 1950’s and 60’s that emphasized grammar-based language instruction. Instead of focusing on grammar, or what students know about the language, advocates of the new proficiency paradigm believe instruction should focus on what students can *do* with the language (Breiner-Sanders, 1991). *In other words, they are concerned with the degree to which students can communicate thoughts, feelings, opinions, etc., using the target language, and not with what vocabulary they have learned, or what verbs they can conjugate.*

Furthermore, *the proficiency paradigm emphasizes the notion of embedding instruction within a meaningful context.* The context of communication should guide what aspects of grammar and vocabulary are addressed and how they are taught (Breiner-Sanders, 1991). For example, a Spanish class may focus on the context of “family.” Relevant verbs like “vivir” (to live) would be addressed and students would be taught how to conjugate verbs similar to “vivir.”

Context should also serve as a tool for increasing students’ levels of sophistication with the language. As students’ proficiency increases, they can be challenged by communicating within a more complex context. For example, a beginning learner’s communication would be based on the immediate context, whereas a more advanced learner’s communication would be embedded in an abstract, social-historical context. This emphasis on context is reflective of a constructivist, “whole language” approach to instruction.

In addition to the new proficiency-based paradigm, *foreign language instruction is now characterized by an emphasis on the development of students’ “sociocultural competence”* (Overfield, 1997). Sociocultural competence refers to a speaker’s understanding and sensitivity to the specific verbal mannerisms that characterize a culture, and the ability to apply these mannerisms to his/her own speech when interacting with members of the culture. For example, a student of Spanish can learn how Spaniards often use their hands to add emphasis to what they are saying. By adding similar gestures to his/her own communicative style the student will convey meaning more effectively and promote the development of positive relationships with members of the culture that are characterized by mutual respect.

Finally, current foreign language curriculum and teaching emphasizes the idea of directly relating the target language to students’ lives in three ways:

1. *Students should be encouraged to use the foreign language in their other courses.*
2. *Students should be encouraged to make comparisons between the foreign language and their own, first language.*
3. *Students should use and relate the foreign language within the surrounding community.*
(Lafayette, 1996)

By connecting the foreign language in these ways to students' experiences, learning the language becomes a much more meaningful task. This in turn promotes student motivation and achievement in foreign language learning.

The overriding themes in current foreign language curriculum and pedagogy are communication (proficiency), context, culture and connections. These are reflected in the current, national, voluntary foreign language standards that were developed as a joint effort between ACTFL and the American Associations of the Teaching of French, German, Spanish & Portuguese. An eleven-member task force was selected for the actual writing of the standards. The two major criteria for selection of the members were that each be a representative of the field of foreign languages and be a currently practicing teacher. Furthermore, the work of this task force was monitored and guided by a twenty-one member advisory council, and each draft of their work was revised by a 141 member board of reviewers.

The National Standards for Foreign Languages

In 1993, four national language organizations; the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, the American Association of Teachers of French, the American Association of Teachers of German, and the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese received funding to develop standards for foreign language education, grades K-12.

Each standard includes a set of four benchmarks for grades 4, 8 and 12. It is important to realize that these benchmarks are not intended as curriculum guides. They do not describe specific course content; rather, they suggest types of curricular experiences that are needed to help students to achieve the standards and that should be used in conjunction with local standards.

The standards were categorized into five goal areas, known as the "Five C's". They are **Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities**.

Communication - Communicate in languages other than English

Standard 1.1: *Students engage in conversations, provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, and exchange opinions.*

Standard 1.2: *Students understand and interpret written and spoken language on a variety of topics.*

Standard 1.3: *Students present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners or readers on a variety of topics.*

This first "C", communication, is a reflection of the proficiency paradigm movement of the 1980's. The three standards under this category focus on *what students can do* with the target language. The

benchmarks for each standard represent a gradual increase in the complexity of context in which the students are expected to communicate. For example, students in grade 4 are expected to communicate information relating to their immediate context, like their family or friends. Students in grade 12, on the other hand, are expected to communicate information that relates to a more abstract and complex context, such as current social issues.

Cultures - Gain knowledge and understanding of other cultures.

Standard 2.1: Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied.

Standard 2.2: Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the culture studied.

Culture is fundamental for language learning since language is shaped by culture. For example, while studying English in Taiwan, one of the authors was told by her English teacher that there were some questions that should not be asked in an English-speaking community, for example, a woman's age or a person's salary. Thus integrating culture into language can help students to use the target language more appropriately.

Connections - Connect with other disciplines and acquire information.

Standard 3.1: Students reinforce and further their knowledge of other disciplines through the foreign language.

Standard 3.2: Students acquire information and recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its culture.

This standard promotes the meaningfulness of the target language for students by relating it to experiences in other classes. Thus, the context for their language learning is not confined to one classroom. Furthermore, by using the language across the curriculum, students practice using the language as a tool to access and process knowledge and information. For example, students can write reports and summaries in Spanish of what they are learning in other classes such as science and social studies.

Comparisons - Develop insight into the nature of language and culture

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

Standard 4.2: Students demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own.

Through comparisons and contrasts with the language being studied, students develop insight into the nature of their own language and culture. For example, students compare the sound and spelling patterns of "Germanic" and "Romance" languages. They can then use this comparison to discover how the different phonological systems of a language require different gesticulations for correct pronunciation.

Such comparisons promote a more sophisticated concept of what defines a culture and how languages evolve through interaction and borrowing from other languages.

Communities - Participate in multilingual communities at home and around the world.

Standard 5.1: Students use the language both within and beyond the school setting.

Standard 5.2: Students show evidence of becoming life-long learners by using the language for personal enjoyment and enrichment.

When used with the four goals mentioned above, this standard enables students to use the target language in multilingual/multicultural communities, both at home and in the world. For example, students in multicultural communities are encouraged to shop in stores owned by members of the target culture, and to interact with both employees and clientele. This standard is considered to be the ultimate goal of the "Five C's" because it requires lifelong learning and usage of the target language.

Challenges of Implementation

The goal of the national foreign language standards is students' effective and appropriate use of the target language across a variety of contexts. This goal is effectively achieved through instruction that is proficiency-based and focused on cultural understanding. However, the actual implementation of such instruction faces two major challenges. The first challenge is posed by foreign language curricula that are still by in large grammar-focused. This focus on grammar is the result of various factors, including the types of foreign language texts that are most often used, teacher training and student expectations. Most of the best selling textbooks are grammar based, most teachers have received little, if any, training on how best to teach culture, and most students equate language learning with grammar and vocabulary (Thornbury, 1998). Changing these three factors will require long term efforts on the part of all foreign language professionals, including teachers, researchers and prospective employers.

The second challenge is posed by the lack of opportunities for student interaction with members of the target culture in certain school districts. For example, a Spanish classroom in a small rural Pennsylvania community may be disadvantaged because of the absence of a Spanish speaking population. Recent advances in telecommunications (internet, World Wide Web) can attenuate these discrepancies by allowing students to communicate using e-mail, discussion groups and web pages (Overfield, 1997). However, in order to effectively make use of the internet, additional resources need to be allocated to schools that have limited access to such technology.

Reflections

We conclude by describing what we perceive to be the major strengths and weaknesses of the national foreign language standards. The greatest strength of the standards is the inclusion and emphasis on the context and meaningfulness of language learning. Educational research continually demonstrates that learning occurs when students can make meaningful connections between new information and what they already know. By emphasizing context in language learning, and relationship of the target language to its culture students are helped to make meaningful connections. When students can relate the target language to their own language and culture, associations are reiterated and reinforced.

We see as another strength of the standards the encouragement for using the target language across the curriculum. When students use a foreign language for other coursework, they increase the time and variety of contexts in which they practice the language. Such practice, distributed over time and

space, greatly fosters learning.

Finally, we see a challenge for the standards that relates to grammar instruction. Although aspects of grammar can be taught incidentally and as they relate to a specific theme, grammar instruction should follow a pattern that is sensitive to the complexity of linguistic form. For example, in the case of Spanish, some basic rules of verb conjugation should be taught before teaching students more complex and irregular verbs. A balanced curriculum is proposed that includes some direct grammatical instruction.

The path carved by educational change and reform has been likened to that of a pendulum swing. The question is "Can the length of arc that the standards follow be guided and adjusted contextually by educators to ensure success for all children?"

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