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Principles and Practices of the *Standards* in College Foreign Language Education

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Chapter 2

The National *Standards* at the Postsecondary Level: A Blueprint and Framework for Change

Robert M. Terry, University of Richmond (Emeritus)

Stability in language teaching is synonymous with rigor mortis.

—Ernest Weekley, *The English Language* (1929)

Introduction

For many decades of foreign language education teachers have been engaged in numerous searches for “the one true way” to teach. We have experimented with the Direct Method, ALM, Total Physical Response (TPR), Suggestopedia, proficiency, and various other methods, approaches, trends, fads, and movements.¹ None of these have offered us *the way*. In 1996, we found ourselves in the midst of another phenomenon occasioned by the appearance of the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* (SFLL). These national standards have had an enormous impact on state frameworks, K-12 curricula, textbooks, and teaching methods. Yet, the haunting question remains: Why have they not had an effect—any noticeable effect—at the postsecondary level?

The national standards offer an exciting new way to look at learning a language. The old four-skills approach, or reading, writing, listening, and speaking, has given way to the three communicative modes.² Yet, phrases such as “a refreshing *new way*” imply change. Change, in turn, means abandoning what has worked so well for so many years (in some minds) and doing something new, untested, unproven, not yet validated through quantitative and qualitative studies.

Change, especially at the postsecondary level, is often an anathema. What is wrong with what we have been doing? Why change? The call for change is not from administration in response to the newest buzzword, the newest effort at effective marketing, or a new focus for accreditation. The impetus for change is from outside the university setting—and that is particularly bothersome to some. The impetus for change has been planted in the minds of certain faculty members—predominantly that body of people who exhibit an unhealthy interest in foreign language pedagogy and methodology and those who teach the foundation courses: those first- and second-year language courses that fulfill the so-called general education “proficiency requirement.”

Why change? Why even consider change? Curiosity, if nothing more, should make us want to know why high school students are coming to us prepared differently in foreign languages, why our textbooks look and are different, why

our language laboratories are being transformed into media centers or global studios. What we have been doing needs to be reconsidered in light of new thinking—revitalizing new thinking, in the shape of the national standards, that has already caused noticeable changes at the K-12 level. This new thinking energizes me with the possibilities for change, and those possibilities as well as a clear road map are laid out in the national standards. The national standards can offer us at the postsecondary level a new, different, better, and effective plan.

The National Standards

The national standards, a product of a collaborative effort among 10 different foreign language associations,³ first appeared in 1996 as a response to the mandate by the U.S. Department of Education that all core subjects in American schools should have a set of national standards. The basic philosophical tenet of the standards is the following:

Language and communication are at the heart of human experience. The United States must educate students who are equipped linguistically and culturally to communicate successfully in a pluralistic society and abroad. This imperative envisions a future in which ALL students will develop and maintain proficiency in English and at least one other language, modern or classical (Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century [SFLL], 2006, p. 7).

To this end, the national standards offer 5 basic goals and 11 standards. These standards are content standards: They define what students should know and be able to do.⁴ The implications of the national standards are timely and important.

The development of standards has galvanized the field of foreign language education. The degree of involvement, and of consensus, among educators at all levels has been unprecedented. [...] Clearly, the foreign language standards provide the broader, more complete rationale for foreign language education that we have sought for decades but never managed to capture in words or in concept until now.” (SFLL, 2006, p. 15)

The bottom line is that “standards have defined the agenda for the next decade—and beyond” (p. 15).

The Modern Language Association and Foreign Languages

In May 2007, the Modern Language Association (MLA) published the report of its Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, *Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World*. For many of us, this report is truly eye-opening; the MLA is supporting “a broad, intellectually driven approach to teaching language and culture in higher education” (p. 1). Yet, the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* are mentioned

nowhere in the 2007 MLA report. This does not mean, however, that the essence of the report cannot be and is not grounded in the spirit and basic tenets of the standards.

The report gives a concise statement of the current situation: "... the usefulness of studying languages other than English is no longer contested. The goals and means of language study, however, continue to be hotly debated" (MLA, 2007, p. 2). There is a continuum of the various approaches to foreign language (FL) study, with one end anchored in an instrumental view—language consists of skills to use in communicating thought and information—and the other anchored in a constitutive view⁵—language represents what we are, think, and reveal about ourselves. Depending on institutional missions and teaching approaches espoused, we can find ourselves located at any point on this continuum. Most often at the university level, foreign language departments tend to emphasize the constitutive aspect of language, whereas freestanding language schools and some campus language resource centers have an instrumentalist focus.

The MLA report points out the narrow focus of goals of language study that exist in the standard configuration of university FL curricula: A 2- or 3-year language sequence feeds into a set of core courses that focus on canonical literature. "This configuration defines both the curriculum and the governance structure of language departments and creates a division between the language curriculum and the literature curriculum and between tenure-track literature professors and language instructors in non-tenure-track positions" (MLA, 2007, p. 2).

We are aware of the rifts that such a dichotomy can cause in language departments—"humanists do research while language specialists provide technical support and basic training" (MLA, 2007, p. 3). With the MLA report, the organization hopes to convince the humanists, the literature faculty, "that it is in our common interest to devise new models" (p. 3), and that means to change.

The MLA Report and the National Standards

The MLA report calls for getting rid of the two-tiered configuration that "has outlived its usefulness and needs to evolve" (MLA, 2007, p. 3). The report recommends replacing the two-tiered language/literature structure with

... a broader and more coherent curriculum in which language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole, supported by alliances with other departments and expressed through interdisciplinary courses.... [...] [F]oreign language departments, if they are to be meaningful players in higher education—or indeed, if they are to thrive as autonomous units—must transform their programs and structure. (MLA, 2007, p. 3)

The report further recommends that the language major be structured to produce educated users of another language who have deep translingual and transcultural competence, and not users whose goal is to rival or equal the abilities of the native speaker⁶ (MLA, 2007, p. 3).

With its 5 goals and 11 standards, the national standards reflect each of the elements in the MLA report's recommendations:

- language, literature, and culture taught as a coherent whole (the Cultures goal);
- interdisciplinary collaborative courses (the Connections goal);
- language learners functioning as informed and capable interlocutors with educated native speakers in the target language (the Cultures and Communities goals);
- understanding other cultures and languages (the Cultures and Comparisons goals);
- training language learners to reflect on the world and themselves through the lens of another language and culture (the Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities goals);
- comprehending speakers of the target language as members of foreign societies (the Communication, Cultures, Comparisons, and Communities goals);
- learners understanding themselves as Americans—as members of a society that is foreign to others (the Comparisons goal);
- relating to fellow members of their own society who speak languages other than English (the Communities goal). (MLA, 2007, p. 4)

The goals advocated by the MLA report evoke all of the SFLG goals: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. There are indeed common threads and goals between these two documents.

So, What Is the Problem?

As noted earlier, the MLA report is quite explicit in its recommendations that foreign language departments must change their programs and structure if they want to play a meaningful role in higher education. We as faculty bloc at the postsecondary level can no longer resemble the proverbial ostrich with its head in the sand, ignoring its surroundings. We must speak with a unified voice and not as opposing factions. We can no longer dig our heels in and resist change and ignore what is going on in foreign language education, all the more so when the products of a revamped, remodeled K-12 curriculum are arriving in our classrooms with a preparation that is quite different from what students presented a decade ago.

How and Why Did This Revamping and Remodeling Occur?

In the mid-1990s, most states began discussions about greater accountability in K-12 education. At a minimum, accountability revolves around content standards, curriculum development, teaching and learning, assessments, and professional development. During this period, many professional organizations for various

content areas began a push for “national” standards in their respective subject areas. These so-called national standards were generally developed with input from a broad group of stakeholders, including K-12 educators, higher education faculty, and business leaders. Because the U.S. Constitution delegates the responsibility for education to the states, there was never any movement to encourage all states to adopt the national standards. Instead, most states revised their own standards after those established at the national level, with modifications to suit each state’s circumstances.

The *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* (SFL, 2006), which first appeared in 1996, had a significant impact on the standards/frameworks for many states by providing a blueprint for change. Specifically in foreign languages, the standards place much greater emphasis on communication than was the case in the past—both oral and written communication. In the past, a student entering college might have had a stronger background in reading works of literature rather than being able to talk about it. With the new standards, K-12 educators would be spending more time on oral skills (L. M. Wallinger, personal communication, November 18, 2008).

Here Is the Problem

I have pointed out that the newest K-12 curricula are different. I have mentioned that current materials are different. It appears, however, that postsecondary curricula are not keeping abreast of those at the K-12 levels. Why?

A large part of the problem lies in the fact that many teachers at the postsecondary level ignore the focus of foreign language programs and pedagogical instructions/guidelines that appear in current textbooks. Again, why? There is no apparent fit between the new focus and a curriculum and teaching mold that are outmoded and ineffective. Shrum and Glisan (2005) state, “... more attention to context is evident in some textbook series published in the last several years, since many of them have begun to integrate connections to other disciplines, exploration of cultural perspectives, and interaction with target-language communities” (p. 55). Although research in second language learning supports the notion that learners must engage in meaningful communication, we still find a heavy dependence on drill and form-focused activities that lack meaning. Nonetheless, K-12 teachers who are eager to include the national standards in their curriculum, yet who must use one textbook series for 7 to 10 years or even longer, can adapt these textbooks to bring them more up to date (pp. 55–56). Along with the changes and adaptations in textbooks, the atmosphere of the classroom has changed: communicative activities, the emphasis on culture, the integration of technology and media. There is a new look and a new enthusiasm for foreign language teaching and learning.

Change has indeed occurred at the K-12 level. Change is occurring much more slowly at the postsecondary level. Why? What is the obstacle? In 1989 in her article on reshaping the college-level curriculum, Dorothy James points out why there is such ignorance—both a lack of knowledge and unawareness—and

avoidance of what can potentially help us reshape the curriculum of foreign language departments at the postsecondary level across the United States. Although James's comment that follows is an observation from 20 years ago, it astutely illustrates the continued slowness of change and reticence to change at the postsecondary level:

In writing this chapter, I am very much aware that not many of my colleagues in the senior professoriat of foreign language departments are likely to read it. Nor indeed are many of those who aspire to the senior professoriat. They do not go to conferences like the Northeast Conference, and they do not read volumes like the Northeast Conference *Reports*. Why should they? They are no more professionally interested in the teaching of foreign languages than are nuclear physicists. It is not their field. (James, 1989, p. 79)

James goes on to say that “a new ‘college-level’ curriculum needs to play an integrated part in a new continuum from elementary to high school to college to graduate school” (James, 1989, p. 85). She laments the then present “ferment” in which the two-tiered college teaching profession (also referred to in the 2007 MLA report) regarded themselves as two distinct groups: the foreign language teachers and the literary scholars. A willingness to listen to and consider viable rationales for change must exist for there to be the remotest possibility and opportunity for a totally reformed college foreign language curriculum.

In her 1998 article, “Major Changes: The Standards Project and the New Foreign Language Curriculum,” Swaffar suggests “some of the ways American institutions of higher education are changing and how those changes affect the way we, as a profession, need to think about the third and fourth year of language instruction in our colleges and universities” (Swaffar, 1998). While focusing on the “post-requirement” level of language study, Swaffar nonetheless gives a strong rationale for change at the postsecondary level, recognizing that some academics deplore the dual demands of accountability: “the mastery of our fields and the application of language skills in the workplace after graduation as extensions of cultural and literacy learning from the FL curriculum” (Swaffar, 1998).

In a similar vein to James's appeal for revision from the 1980s, Corral and Patai (2008), in their commentary that appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, sound the alarm—maybe the death knell—of foreign languages with their reports of the closure of the German department at the University of Southern California and the proposal to end German at Humboldt State University. They tell of the forcible merger of five separate language and literature departments at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst into one megadepartment renamed “languages, literatures, and cultures.” Though such mergers or the demise of various language departments at smaller colleges and universities are particularly true of less commonly taught languages, including French, German, and Russian, Spanish seems to be apart and not undergoing such a fate. Nonetheless, the same phenomenon is occurring at much larger schools such as the University

of Massachusetts–Amherst and Virginia Commonwealth University. This alarm should be heeded by all language departments and should be a prod to push foreign language faculty at the postsecondary level to action: reconsider, restructure, retool, or simply die out.

The MLA report takes a more positive approach:

We expect that more students will continue language study if courses incorporate cultural inquiry at all levels and if advanced courses address more subject areas. [...] [F]aculty members will have the opportunity to bring into the classroom the full breadth of their knowledge of the society about which they teach, including that society's languages and language variants, literatures, and cultures." (MLA, 2007, p. 4)

The report points out that many colleges and universities have already made a successful transition toward this broad understanding of language study and urges others to follow. College/university foreign language faculty cannot afford to be ignorant or recalcitrant. To survive, they *must* consider this moment as an opportunity for a totally reformed college curriculum.

Conclusion

Let me repeat a statement by Weekley (1929): "Stability in language teaching is synonymous with *rigor mortis*."

Change is essential and inevitable, and most often good and slow to happen. The MLA report cautions that unless the kind and degree of change that it calls for "happens over the next ten years, college and university departments of foreign languages will not be in a position to provide leadership in advanced language education" (MLA, 2007, p. 7). In fact, the continued existence of autonomous/independent departments of foreign languages might be in jeopardy.

Corral and Patai (2008, p. A30) express their concern over an end to foreign languages and an end to the liberal arts. They say, "If foreign languages, whether under enrolled or not, are to survive today, they need to stake a claim for their intrinsic value and their relationship to the study of foreign cultures" (p. A30).

Foreign language educators know that there is indeed an intrinsic value to the study of foreign languages. We cannot sit idly and passively and watch our enrollments in so many language courses, especially involving less commonly taught languages, continue to decline, our departments be abolished, downsized, or merged. One thing is certain: We are not preparing and cannot prepare students to function in a 21st-century multilingual, multicultural world as long as we remain entrenched in the language/literature mode and mentality. The consequences will likely be that despite the need for greater global understanding, our programs at the postsecondary level will suffer. One effect will be a decrease in the number of majors. "Skills to succeed in today's world increasingly call for language and culture skills for both political and economic gain. The concentration of foreign language study based in the study of past and present literatures

will not withstand the need for true communication” (L. M. Wallinger, personal communication, July 16, 2008).

Corral and Patai lament the current, apparently unimportant role that literature plays in the study of foreign languages. In the national standards, literature is considered a primary cultural artifact. Not only should students have experience with the language system, they will need to have access to “the richness of the cultures of the languages being studied. They will need to learn about everyday life and social institutions, about contemporary and historical issues that are important in those cultures, about significant works of literature and art, and about cultural attitudes and priorities” (SFLL, 2006, p. 34). All of these elements exist in literature. No one is advocating abandoning the study of literature. We need a new perspective, a restructuring of our goals, of what we are doing. How can we offer language for communicative purposes that can be blended with other fields such as medicine, journalism, law, business, rather than dwell on the old paradigm of a foreign language literature major?

We can look to the national standards to offer us the new perspective. Do not misunderstand me—they are not a panacea. They do, however, offer us a functional blueprint and framework that can help move our curricula and our goals into the 21st century. A change in perspective and practice will indeed make what we actually do reflect what we claim that we do.

The two-tiered college teaching profession will doubtlessly continue to exist, but one faction must realize that there is a new focus that does not forsake the teaching of literature for “culture-based courses, not to mention the ever-proliferating film courses that so many of us teach nowadays” (Corral & Patai, 2008, p. A30). Literature will continue to be important. Corral and Patai may have a fatalistic viewpoint tempered with a modicum of reality when they claim that

deans typically speak the same language as faculty members: the language of multiculturalism and diversity, which tends to take a dim view of discrete literary fields, each with its own long history, while somehow imagining that we can teach all aspects of culture at once in a combined course. (2008, p. A30)

It might be too late to be proactive, but we can react by changing, by demonstrating our relevance in giving our students what they need to be equipped linguistically and culturally to *function* successfully in a pluralistic society both here and abroad.⁷

There is so much misunderstanding—or a lack of understanding or interest—of what is going on in the world of foreign language education. Many college/university foreign language faculty members do not attend language conferences or read publications that smack of or focus on pedagogy. Why? As James remarked 20 years ago, those faculty members are simply not interested in teaching *language* [my emphasis]; it is not their field.

Indeed, some colleges and universities have re-created their curricula using the national standards as a framework, especially for lower-level courses. Goals and objectives for lower-level courses are based on the national standards. New textbooks that are modeled on the *Standards* are being written and adopted. Assessment of learning is changing and is based on actual, realistic student performance and not simply on mastery of a given corpus of grammar. Even in some upper-level courses, especially conversation and composition, classroom activities and assessment are shaped by the three communicative modes.⁸

We simply cannot ignore what is going on in foreign language education. Do not misunderstand what I am saying: I am not claiming that the national standards are a cure-all. As I have said: they are not a panacea. They do not point the way to foreign language paradise. They are not *the* answer, just as the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM), the Natural Approach, and the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines were not *the* answer either.

The national standards document (SFLL, 2006) is designed to “provide a gauge against which to measure improvement in foreign language education in the years to come” (p. 28). As is cautioned in the document, the standards do not describe the current state of FL education in the the United States. The *Standards* is not a curriculum guide nor a stand-alone document. This document must be used in conjunction with specific curricula, goals, and objectives of individual programs to determine the best approaches and reasonable expectations for students in that particular environment (SFLL, 2006, p. 28).⁹

We do need to examine the standards and learn just what they do have to offer as a blueprint and framework for our curricula. Just as a blueprint is drawn but can be modified according to needs, so it is with a curriculum based on the national standards. Curricula and goals do not have to be identical. At the K-12 level, the national standards serve as a core around which various state frameworks are built.¹⁰ Different interpretations of the standards will lead to differences in programs, and this is fine. We simply need to consider quite seriously just what the national standards are advocating. We know the impact that the national standards have had on state frameworks and local curricula at the K-12 level; now it is up to foreign language educators at the postsecondary level to see what the blueprint might look like from their perspective. Though not *the* answer, the *Standards* can give us a refreshing new perspective on foreign language study in the most inclusive sense of the discipline: language, literature, culture and the knowledge, skills, and abilities that come with such study.

Ellen Glasgow said: “The only difference between a rut and a grave is their dimensions” (Glasgow, 2008). We must avoid staying in our rut if we want to be relevant, necessary, and important, and also if we want to survive.

Notes

1. For a brief summary of the chronological development of language teaching, see Shrum and Glisan’s *Teacher’s Handbook*, 3rd ed. (2005), pp. 444–447.

2. The three communicative modes are the Interpersonal, Interpretive, and Presentational. See the national standards (SFL, 2006, pp. 36–38) for a full discussion of these three modes.
3. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, American Association of Teachers of Arabic, American Association of Teachers of French, American Association of Teachers of German, American Association of Teachers of Italian, American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese, American Classical League, American Council of Teachers of Russian, Chinese Language Association of Secondary-Elementary Schools/Chinese Language Teachers Association, and the National Council of Japanese Language Teachers/Association of Teachers of Japanese.
4. The Proficiency Guidelines of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) lay the groundwork for performance standards—standards that indicate how well a language user performs. ACTFL has already published the *Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners* (1998), in which levels of performance are indicated for three different levels of proficiency.
5. “... language is understood as an essential element of a human being’s thought processes, perceptions, and self-expressions; and as such it is considered to be at the core of translanguing and transcultural competence” (MLA, 2007, p. 2).
6. In the MLA report we find the statement “Four-year language majors often graduate with disappointingly low levels of linguistic ability” (MLA, 2007, p. 7).
7. Much of the K-12 discussion with the business world and with higher education is now centered around preparing students for the 21st century—which is here and now—and for jobs that have not yet even been created. We at the postsecondary level must be aware of what skills K-12 educators are being asked to promote. (See http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=254&Itemid=120.)
8. At the University of Richmond, our general education, i.e., required course syllabi for both beginning- and intermediate-level French are firmly grounded on both the national standards and the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. A few years ago, we created a new capstone experience for our foreign language majors—a portfolio. A portfolio “documents the growth and development of students *over a period of time*; it is a rich description of a learner’s work and offers perspectives that tests do not provide. [...] In a portfolio, learners have an opportunity to select evidence of their learning, reflect on, and make it part of the assessment of their learning. In this way, they become empowered to participate in their own assessment” (Shrum & Glisan, 2005, p. 383).

While portfolios are not new, our framework was built on the national standards; students were to include artifacts from each of the five goals: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. Our faculty understood the national standards. Our graduating seniors were given an introductory session on the national standards, and we made all of that information and more available to them on the department’s Web page.

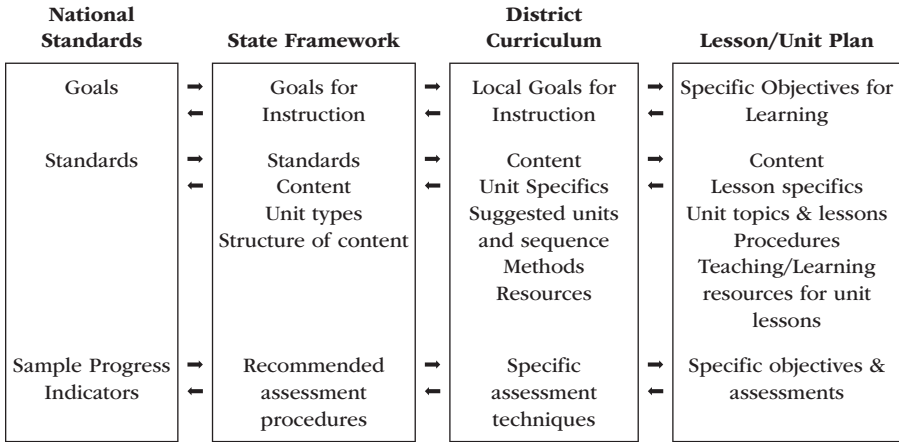
9. The following figure points out the interrelationships among national, state, and local standards documents (SFL, 2006, p. 28). While specifically illustrating K-12 documents, the figure clearly shows that individual mission statements,

goals, objectives, along with expectations of student performance can indeed fit well in any program at any level that is based on or structured around the national standards and maintain the integrity of that program.

Figure

The relationships among national, state, and local standards.

The Relationships Among National, State, and Local Standards Documents



Adapted with permission from the *Visual Arts Education Reform Handbook: Suggested Policy Perspectives on Art Content and Student Learning in Art Education* National Art Education Association, 1995.

- See for example Virginia’s *Foreign Language Standards of Learning* (<http://www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/Instruction/Language/#flsol>). The following site on the Web offers links to state and local foreign language standards nationwide: <http://www.utm.edu/staff/globeg/flstand.shtml>. A simple perusal of any of these standards will show the widespread impact that the national standards have made throughout the United States.

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