Teaching World Languages: A Practical Guide

Chapter 2: Standards for Foreign Language Learning

Beginning in the 1990s, the language teaching profession in the United States adopted a standards-based approach to language education. Standards-based language education focuses on a student's proficiency: what the student knows and is able to do with the language. This approach has important implications for both curriculum and assessment.

Fig. 2-1-1 ©Syda Productions

- *Curriculum:* Curriculum is set out in frameworks that outline the knowledge and skills that learners at specific levels are expected to acquire. This means that each individual lesson, as well as the curriculum for an entire year, is developed on the basis of the goal of instruction—what it will enable the learner to understand, know and be able to do.

- *Assessment:* Assessment looks at what each student understands, knows and is able to do in relation to the standards for that student's level. This means that each student is assessed in relation to established criteria (criterion-referenced testing), rather than in relation to other students (norm-referenced testing).

This section provides information about language learning standards that have been developed as core standards for foreign language learning. The discussion in this section is based on and uses the ACTFL *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21*st *Century* (2006) and the *ACTFL World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages*, (2013). For information on how to obtain a copy of the Standards, see Resources. They were developed for use at the national level. A number of states, school districts, and localities have developed their own standards-based curriculum frameworks for language learning. Those are not addressed directly in this module.

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Chapter Contents

Standards for Foreign Language Learning

The standards for foreign language learning are **content** standards: they describe **what** a student should know and be able to do at different levels of proficiency.

The standards are correlated with five broad goal areas, referred to as "The Five C's." These five goals define the purposes of language learning as described by the Task Force of the National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project (2006).

- *Communication:* Communicate effectively in more than one language in order to function in a variety of situations and for multiple purposes
- *Cultures:* Interact with cultural competence and understanding
- *Connections:* Connect with other disciplines and acquire information and diverse perspectives in order to use the language to function in academic and career-related situations
- *Comparisons:* Develop insight into the nature of language and culture in order to interact with cultural competence
- *Communities:* Communicate and interact with cultural competence in order to participate in multilingual communities at home and around the world
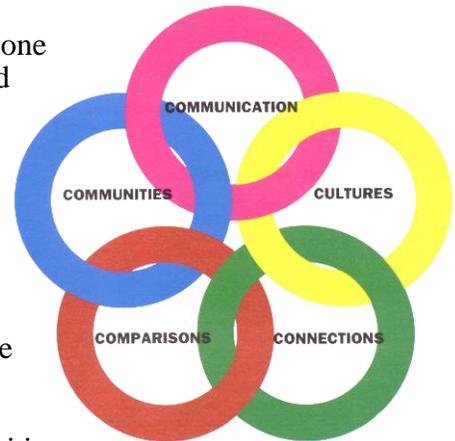
Fig. 2-3-1 ©ACTFL

These goals focus on how language is used in real-life situations; they assume that students learn a language so that they can use it. To work within the standards framework, you as a language teacher, need to keep the following perspective in mind. What will the students gain—by the end of this lesson, this thematic unit, this year—in communication ability, cultural knowledge, understanding of the nature of language and culture, and ability to use the language to acquire information and participate in the communities where it is spoken?

Each goal has specific standards. These are described under each goal. In addition, the communication goal includes modes, or different ways of communicating. They are called interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational.

Goal 1: Communication

> **Standard 1.1:** Learners interact and negotiate meaning in spoken, signed, or written conversations to share information, reactions, feelings, and opinions**.**
> **Standard 1.2:** Learners understand, interpret, and analyze what is heard, read, or viewed on a variety of topics.
> **Standard 1.3:** Learners present information, concepts, and ideas to inform, explain, persuade, and narrate on a variety of topics using appropriate media and adapting to various audiences of listeners, readers, or viewers.

Communication
Cultures
Connections
Comparisons
Communities

Fig. 2-4-1 ©SWCockey

These standards reflect an important change in focus for the language teaching profession, from form to function.

- Before the standards, language teaching focused on the *form* of the activity that the student was doing, whether receptive (listening, reading) or productive (speaking, writing). This focus on listening, speaking, reading, and writing as skill areas did not necessarily take into account the purpose for communicating or the context in which communication was taking place.
- With the Standards, language teaching focuses on the *function* or purpose of the activity that the student is doing. Language is taught in three communicative modes: interpersonal (Standard 1.1), interpretive (Standard 1.2), and presentational (Standard 1.3). This approach considers the content or topic of communication, the identities and relationship of the communicators, and the cultural and social context in which communication is taking place.

Interpersonal communication is the continued negotiation of meaning through language. Every reply has an effect upon the next message, and the conversation evolves continuously throughout the exchange. Interpersonal communication can take place in a conversation (speaking and listening) or in written correspondence (writing, reading, and signing).

Interpretive communication is a listening, viewing, or reading activity, such as listening to an announcement on a public address system, watching a movie, or reading a letter. The listener, viewer, or reader does not have any way to question the sender of the message, ask for repetition, or negotiate meaning.

Presentational communication is one-way speaking or writing *from* the student *to* an audience. It requires students to strategically formulate how best to make themselves understood, using their full proficiency to convey their ideas, concepts and information. Presentational communication can take such forms as giving speeches and oral presentations, telling stories, composing and reciting poetry, performing skits, writing reports, brochures, and essays, and creating a number of other spoken and written works.

Fig. 2-4-2 ©Clairfulton

For a discussion of teaching interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational language use, see Chapter 6: Interpersonal Communication, Chapter 7: Interpretive Communication, and Chapter 8: Presentational Communication. For discussion of assessment of these modes, see Chapter 4: Assessment.

Goal 2: Cultures

> **Standard 2.1:** Learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the cultures studied.
>
> **Standard 2.2:** Learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship between the products and perspectives of the cultures studied.

Fig. 2-5-1 ©Alexmax

Goal 2 and its associated standards reflect the concept that language and culture are connected so deeply that neither one can really be taught or learned in isolation from the other. Language exists in a cultural context, so cultural knowledge is an integral part of language proficiency. Language gives students access to a culture's worldview or perspectives, including its values, ideas, and attitudes. Language also enables students to see the connections between those perspectives and cultural practices (Standard 2.1) and products (Standard 2.2).

- Cultural practices are the ways in which a group of people behave or act. For example, in some cultures a young person uses one form of address for older adults and another one for peers. The presence or absence of this cultural practice in a language reflects the culture's age-related values and its attitude about the importance of showing respect for elders. When learning a language, a student must learn not only the forms of address, but also when and how to use them; this gives the student insight into the culture's perspectives on youth and age.

- Cultural products are the things that a group of people make, use, or build. For example, every culture has ideas about what clothing is appropriate and acceptable for women, men, and children to wear. These ideas reflect values and attitudes about the roles of men, women, and children, and their relationships with one another. When learning a language, a student must learn not only the words for various articles of clothing, but also who wears them, when they are worn, and why; this gives the student insight into the culture's perspectives on gender roles.
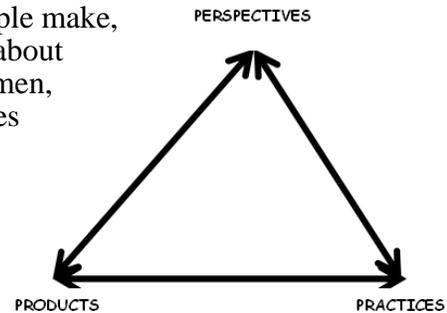
Ifig. 2-5-2 ©SWCockey

For a detailed discussion of teaching culture, see Chapter 9: Teaching Culture.

Goal 3: Connections

Fig. 2-6-1 ©Lillehoj

> **Standard 3.1:** Learners build, reinforce, and expand their knowledge of other disciplines while using the language to develop critical thinking and to solve problems creatively.
> **Standard 3.2:** Learners access and evaluate information and diverse perspectives that are available through the language and its cultures.

Goal 3 and its associated standards reflect the idea that language learning gives students access to knowledge that they could not obtain any other way. Learning a language enables students to increase their content knowledge using sources produced in that language (Standard 3.1); for example, they can read about current events online in the language they are learning. Through language learning, students also broaden their worldviews by becoming aware of the knowledge and viewpoints that native speakers of the language possess (Standard 3.2).

Fig. 2-6-2 ©Anubhav Suri

For a detailed discussion of using content in the language classroom, see Chapter 10: Teaching Connections.

Goal 4: Comparisons

Fig. 2-7-1 ©AAurelius

> **Standard 4.1:** Learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the nature of language through comparisons of the language studied and their own.
> **Standard 4.2:** Learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own.

Goal 4 and its associated standards are closely tied to Goal 1 (Communication) and Goal 2 (Cultures). They are based in the notion that, by studying and comparing specific languages and cultures, students become able to understand the broader abstract concepts of "language" and "culture." Students deepen their understanding of human commonalities and differences by developing an understanding of language and culture as aspects of human life. This allows them to recognize that, although each language and culture reflects a value system, no language or culture is intrinsically better or worse than another.

For a detailed discussion of incorporating the broader concepts of language and culture into the language classroom, see Chapter 11: Teaching Comparisons.
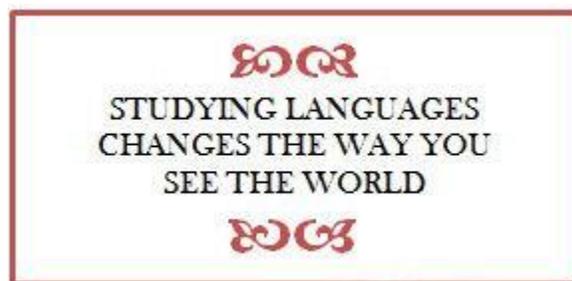

Fig. 2-7-2©SWCockey

Goal 5: Communities

Fig. 2-8-1 ©SWCockey

> **Standard 5.1:** Learners use the language both within and beyond the classroom to interact and collaborate in their community and the globalized world.
> **Standard 5.2:** Learners set goals and reflect on their progress in using languages for enjoyment, enrichment, and advancement.

Goal 5 and its associated standards reflect the notion that learning a language gives students access to communities that they could not obtain any other way. Students become global citizens by moving beyond the classroom to use the language in the larger community for personal and professional reasons.

For a detailed discussion of incorporating community settings in language instruction, see Chapter 12: Teaching Communities.

Fig. 2-8-2 ©SWCockey

Specific Language Standards

Specific standards have been written and published for the following languages:

Arabic	Italian
American Sign Language	Japanese
Chinese	Korean
Classical Languages (Latin and Greek)	Portuguese
French	Russian
German	Scandinavian Languages
Hindi	Spanish

The language specific Standards are based on the generic Standards, but have language-specific adaptations and examples. These Standards are published along with the generic Standards in the same volume (*Standards for Language Learning in the 21*st *Century*, 2006). The third edition of *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21*st *Century* comes with a CD on which 12 of the 14 language specific standards (including commentary on implementing the standards and learning scenarios) are available. ASL and Hindi have not yet been formatted for the CD. (Sandrock, 2014)

Sample Progress Indicators and Can-Do Statements

Sample progress indicators are examples of functions that students can do in the language, at different levels of progress on each of the standards. They are not designed to tell the teacher exactly what to teach or how to teach it, but rather to help schools and teachers to "establish acceptable performance levels for their students" (*Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century*, 2006, p. 28).

Can-Do statements (2013) are designed to help learners identify and know what communicative functions they must be able to perform to achieve a particular level of proficiency. These statements help educators plan a course of action to help learners achieve a proficiency goal. The statements help learners demonstrate what they "can do" with their language knowledge. These "*Can-Do Statements* provide a tool for learners to chart their progress and for educators to organize and support the learning" process. (NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements, Progress Indicators for Language Learners, 2013, website introduction). Thus far, Can-Do Statements have only been written for each mode of communication.

Fig. 2-10-1 ©ACTFL

There are generic sample progress indicators that can be applied to any language, and there are specific sample progress indicators that have been developed for each language that has a specific set of standards. Each Standard is accompanied by sample progress indicators for students at Grade 4, Grade 8, and Grade 12, assuming that students are studying the language from K-12. Many languages also now have sample progress indicators for Grade 16, which is equivalent to senior year in college for a student who has studied the same language consistently since elementary school.

The Can-Do Statements describe communicative proficiency along a sliding scale from Novice to Distinguished, with subdivisions into Low, Mid, and High. These statements provide illustrative information about specific communicative tasks a learner is able to do and thus lets the learner chart progress toward a desired goal. Each of the Can-Do Statements is classified as a communicative, interpretive, or presentational function and incorporates the skill areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Rather than being categorized by grade level, these statements are categorized by what the learner can do. This facilitates placing students on the proficiency scale according to the proficiency they have developed instead of the grade level or age they have reached, thus accommodating multiple entry ages into learning levels.

Each standard includes several sample progress indicators. Below are three examples for Standard 1.1.

> Standard 1.1: Learners interact and negotiate meaning in spoken, signed, or written conversations to share information, reactions, feelings, and opinions.

Grade 4: Students ask and answer questions about such things as family, school events, and celebrations in person or via letters, e-mail, or audio and video tapes.

Grade 8: Students exchange information about personal events, memorable experiences, and other school subjects with peers and/or members of the target cultures.

Grade 12: Students exchange, support, and discuss their opinions and individual perspectives with peers and/or speakers of the target language on a variety of topics dealing with contemporary and historical issues.

Fig. 2-11-1 ©Icefront

Each of the can-do statements is broken down into Benchmarks which provide specific categories and examples. There are several can-do statements that correlate with each Communication standard. Below are three examples of Can-Do Statements for Standard 1.1, Interpersonal Communication.

Novice Mid: I can communicate on very familiar topics using a variety of words and phrases that I have practiced and memorized.
- I can answer a variety of simple questions about my likes and dislikes, my activities, and what I have learned.
- I can communicate some basic information about my everyday life, including weather, places I go, what I eat, the cost of various things I buy, where and when an event is located.

Intermediate Mid: I can participate in conversations on familiar topics using sentences. I can handle short social interactions in everyday situations by asking and answering a variety of questions. I can usually say what I want to say about myself and my everyday life.
- I can talk about my daily activities and personal preferences such as my daily routine, interests and hobbies, my favorite music, movies, and sports and I can talk about why I like these things or when I did or will do something.
- I can exchange information about subjects of special interest to me, including talking about artists, historical events, or projects for math, science, or technology.

Advanced Mid: I can express myself fully not only on familiar topics but also on some concrete social, academic, and professional topics. I can talk in detail and in an organized way about events and experiences in various time frames. I can confidently handle routine situations with an unexpected complication. I can share my point of view in discussions on some complex issues.
- I can communicate effectively on a wide variety of present, past, and future events including giving clear and detailed stories about my childhood, about cultural events, challenges in school or work, and discussing future plans.

- I can exchange general information on topics outside my fields of interest such as points of interest in my community, the world's most visited places, and social and environmental issues.

The progress indicators and Can-Do Statements can be adapted for students who have not studied the language since kindergarten. While the teacher must ensure that the actual content is age appropriate, the general descriptions of progress indicators for the standards, or the Can-Do Statements can be adapted for older students. If the learning sequence is just a few years, the teacher will probably use only the Grade 4 indicators as a base. If it is longer, s/he may be able to use some Grade 8 progress indicators to help develop objectives for older students. With the Can-Do Statements, the proficiency of the learner will determine the base from which to start as the learner enters the course of study.

Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners

Fig. 2-13-1 ©Michael Brown

In addition to the Standards, ACTFL has developed a set of *performance guidelines* for teachers working with language learners in the elementary and secondary grades. These guidelines are *performance* standards: they indicate *how well* students should be able to do in relation to the criteria set out in the standards. For information about how to obtain the Performance Guidelines for students K-12, see Resources at the end of this module.

The performance guidelines focus primarily on Standards 1.1, 1.2. and 1.3 (Communication). They describe student capability in the interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational modes of communication in terms of six criteria:

- *Comprehensibility:* How well are they understood?
- *Comprehension:* How well do they understand?
- *Language control:* How accurate is their language?
- *Vocabulary use:* How extensive and applicable is their vocabulary?
- *Communication strategies:* How do they maintain communication?
- *Cultural awareness:* How is their cultural awareness reflected in their communication?

For each of these criteria, the performance guidelines outline benchmarks for students at three levels:

- *Novice learner range:* the expected range for students who have studied a language in grades K through 4 or grades 5 through 8 or grades 9 and 10
- *Intermediate learner range*: the expected range for students who have studied a language in grades K through 8 or grades 7 through 12 or grades 9 through 12
- *Pre-advanced learner range*: the expected range for students who have studied a language in grades K through 12

Fig. 2-13-2 ©Aydindurdu

The benchmarks are reference points that a teacher can use when assessing student performance. Each benchmark describes what a student at that level can do. For example, for the comprehensibility criterion in the presentational mode, the benchmarks include these can-do statements:

- *Novice:* Use short, memorized phrases and sentences in oral and written presentations
- *Intermediate:* Express their own thoughts, describe and narrate, using sentences and strings of sentences, in oral and written presentations
- *Pre-Advanced:* Report, narrate, and describe, using connected sentences, paragraph-length and longer forms of discourse, in oral and written presentations

As a language teacher, you may find these performance standards useful in two ways. First, they can help you set realistic expectations for your students. By using them in conjunction with the content standards, you can determine both what your students should be able to do and how well they should be able to do it, given the amount of language instruction they have had.

Second, by checking your students' progress in relation to these standards, you will be able to determine whether the curriculum you are using is giving students the appropriate abilities at the appropriate levels. The performance guidelines are designed to be used with a standards-based curriculum that focuses on what students know and are able to do with language. If your students have studied the language in grades 5 through 8, but do not meet some of the benchmarks for the Novice learner range, you may need to determine which aspects of the curriculum are not working as well as they should. Identifying missed benchmarks can help you pinpoint problem areas and correct them. Similarly, identifying benchmarks on which students demonstrate particular strength can show you where the curriculum is most effective.

Fig. 2-14-1 ©Gibsonff

References, Resources, Images, and Credits

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> This is a learning strategies guide for the higher education level.

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> This takes a look at the various strategies children use to learn a foreign language in an immersion setting.

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> This site gives an introduction to the language teaching methods in use. Contains sections on the principles, practice, and examples of language teaching.

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> Includes resources on integrating strategy instruction into a language lesson. Learning strategies charts are available in multiple languages in the Appendices. Twenty learning strategies are highlighted.

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