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# Forum on Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Part 2

In the fall 1999 issue, the *Bulletin* published nine comments in response to *Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the Twenty-First Century* (Yonkers: Natl. Standards in Foreign Lang. Educ. Project, 1996). We offer here nine additional comments. Our original solicitation invited opinion pieces on the implications of the Standards for higher education. Topics we suggested included the teaching of language and literature (the curriculum), the preparation of students entering postsecondary institutions, teacher education, student placement in college and university classes, and articulation. While the forum concludes with the following responses, we are gratified that the Standards will continue to foster constructive conversation between secondary and postsecondary foreign language professionals.

## What Standards? Standards—So What?

UNLESS they have children in elementary, middle, or high school, many college professors may have missed the educational reform movement of the nineties based on "standards." Listing things students should know and be able to do at grades 4, 8, and 12, these content standards have also become a way for schools, districts, and states to measure and compare the progress of their students. This educational reform movement also has significant political and economic implications: attracting dollars for education at state and local levels as well as federal support for identifying and implementing standards in schools across the nation.

The Standards for foreign language learning are less an indication of what students are currently capable of doing than the hope of what, in the best of circumstances, students might be able to do in the next century. While defining Standards for grades K–12 the authors recognize their idealistic nature, for few if any school programs in the United States have second-language instruction beginning in kindergarten and progressing through grade 12. (I am aware of none in Russian.)

Consequently, much of this reform has failed to attract our attention in higher education. The original audience was primary and secondary educators. The vision articulated may be even further from reality by the end of this century since foreign language education enrollments, other than Spanish, have declined. The Standards certainly provide a new context for the latest series of self-studies and reappraisals, at the college level, of what and how we have been teaching in the past decade. Should students be learning language skills or learning about a language? How should the acquisition of language competency, the development of communicative language skills, be complemented by theoretical knowledge about language?

Three of the Standards' five C's—communication, connections, and comparisons—offer a welcome balance for

those feeling sidelined by proficiency in the quest of communicative competency. The importance and legitimacy of literary texts are explicitly recognized in Standard 1.2 "Students understand and interpret written and spoken language on a variety of topics" (9). Sample progress include a student's ability to "analyze the main plot, subplot, characters, their descriptions, roles, and significance in authentic literary texts" (40). The trend over the past decade to use language in context and in cross-disciplinary studies finds voice in Standards 3.1 and 3.2: "Students reinforce and further their knowledge of other disciplines and recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its cultures" (9). I find particularly heartening the recognition of language per se in Standard 4.1 and the attention to language as a system that has frequently been absent in American education in recent years. "Students demonstrate understanding of the nature of language through comparisons of the language studied and their own" (9). All these Standards mirror a reality in college foreign language classes today—certainly those at my institution. Amid the enthusiasm, we would do well to add a note of caution.

While the Standards indicate common ground for articulation, this topic has been around for the past twenty-five years and seems to defy solutions. Quite frankly, the needs and expectations of the college environment are dramatically different from high school realities. The variety afforded by over three thousand institutions of higher learning, each with its own culture and needs, defies any but the broadest of statements on shared goals. It is unrealistic to think that the aims of secondary and postsecondary education need to or even should coincide. There

have also been some unforeseen consequences of the original Standards. There is concern that some local school boards may decide that no language learning is preferable to just a little when presented with a prescription for four-year, eight-year, thirteen-year sequences. In "Clarifying Statement" ACTFL recognizes that extended language study is "the ideal for achieving the highest levels of performance" but that "multiple entry points" must be available for the accommodation of students who, for whatever reason, come to the study of a language (1). Another reality check appears in the recently published *ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners*, which indicates that even after thirteen years of precollege language study most students can at best be expected to achieve the Intermediate level on the ACTFL proficiency scale. Such performance levels are often achieved by college students in an intensive or immersion program of a single year or summer.

The Standards sections on cultures and connections may at first glance prove problematic for the college audience. Some of my colleagues feel strongly that the products of culture (from caviar to vodka or from bagels to baked ziti) ought not to displace or replace other, more intellectual pursuits (from Pushkin to *Pravda*). Even though I wish to support the Standards, I recognize that many of us were not trained and do not feel qualified to do what the Standards require. Others question the presence of nonlinguistic communication and the social science aspect of little "c" culture, from a Russian's table manners to the etiquette on the Moscow metro. It is true that we in higher education need not embrace all aspects of the Standards equally. "Language and communication are at the heart of the human experience" (7). I try to provide a way for my students to acquire the skills to comprehend spoken and written Russian and to communicate in the language orally and in writing, to participate in Russian life at the university level, and ultimately to utilize their language skills and an appreciation for Russian culture and history as a context for using Russian in their future careers. But we offer college credit for demonstrable performance in our courses, not necessarily for experiential learning, valuable as it may be.

In my best-case scenario I hope that the Standards, much like the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* (1982), will call forth a new dialogue and reexamination of what we teach and how, what students are or should be learning, and how we can best help our students achieve those standards of excellence. The vision promises, or at least lets us dream of, the day when more high school graduates will arrive in college with greater and more sophisticated language ability. As the foreign language Standards take

hold in the American educational consciousness, ACTFL is drafting, along with core AATs, Standards expanded from levels K-12 to include K-16 (i.e., through the four-year undergraduate curriculum). The clarity and comprehensive quality of *Standards and Performance Guidelines* provide for a smooth transition between what is taught and learned at school and how we build on that knowledge and those skills in our classrooms. They encourage us to balance the learning and the study of language, practical skills with a sound theoretical foundation and appreciation of what language is. They provide new reasons to expand the study of language beyond English and Spanish to include others less commonly taught: Chinese, Japanese, and Russian and, until recently, some considered more commonly taught, such as French, German, and Italian. If embraced by our institutions the Standards should result in increased professional development opportunities and the necessary retraining to bring them to life in our own pedagogical practice.

Such a conversation will take place, however, only if the Standards move far beyond the confines of ACTFL to be embraced and hotly discussed by the professional organizations, including MLA and ADFL, that primarily address college professors and deans. Standards: What are they? How can they best be achieved? How can progress toward achieving them be measured? These are questions that will shape the future for students in college classrooms in the twenty-first century. Foreign languages at the college level are in serious danger of being marginalized by the social sciences, the humanities, and even the Internet. I fear there is a growing sense that the knowledge of English, plus current or future translation capabilities, is adequate for performing one's task competently. From the beginning those involved with formulating the Standards have sought to be as inclusive as possible. All are welcome to participate in the discussion of this issue, a discussion that will have an impact on our professional lives in the years to come. This is no time to ignore what promises to be the single most driving force in American education. To ignore the Standards is to be left on the sidelines as American education reinvents itself.

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## Works Cited

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