Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency (STAMP):

An Assessment to Measure Proficiency of Interpretive and Presentational Communication

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Teaching can be overwhelming. What to teach? How to teach it? What about assessment? How to fit foreign languages into a PreK–12 curriculum when the demands of national, state and local mandates in other core subjects are monumental. You can feel like you are being pulled in different directions...unless you point all of these complicated tasks in the same direction.

The Center for Applied Second Language Studies (CASLS) has delivered online assessments called STAMP to over 50,000 middle and high school students nationally. As a proficiency-based measure of student performance, STAMP can serve as an exit assessment for K-6 programs as well as assist in articulation between elementary and middle school programs. Additionally, CASLS, together with its partner Language Learning Solutions (LLS), is currently developing an ESL assessment for elementary school students, and is investigating the possibility of developing similar assessments for elementary school foreign language students. We would like to invite NNELL members to join us in the planning associated with the development and refinement of our assessment tools.

CASLS is a National Foreign Language Resource Center funded by the U.S. Department of Education to provide support for foreign language education. A central theme of CASLS is integrating assessment, curriculum, and professional development through national student standards. We see standards as the North Star around which all of these aspects of teaching need to be aligned. It only makes sense that we should test what we teach and then reflect on our practice based on how successful students acquire language. But this is easier said than done. CASLS has done extensive research in order to develop assessment tools to measure proficiency of the national foreign language student standards in order to help teachers orient all aspects of their teaching towards clear proficiency goals.

So far, CASLS has focused on grades 6–16, so the tools described in this article will be most useful for middle school teachers. We hope to develop K–5 versions of these tools in the near future and look forward to input from the NNELL membership on what these might look like. In the meantime, elementary school teachers can look at these standards and assessments as goals that their students can strive for by the time they enter middle school.

Benchmarks

At the core of all these products, CASLS has created Benchmarks. The Benchmarks are based on ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for K–12 Learners (see <http://www.actfl.org>), but are much more specific (see <http://casls.uoregon.edu> and click on "Curriculum and Assessment" then on "Benchmarks"). This specificity is the key to the whole system. By "digitizing" proficiency, we make the abstract concepts of proficiency concrete and allow assessment items and teaching materials to be stored in a database. At Benchmark 3 (analogous to Novice High), for example, teachers know that students must perform the function of describing related to the topic of family (e.g., "My dad is tall and works downtown").

The systems we have developed are all online and require no special software. You can view screen shots and explanations at <http://casls.uoregon.edu> or <www.onlinells.com>.

Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency (STAMP)

Assessment is at the core of a standards-based system. Unless we all use the same measuring stick, how can we ever judge our students fairly and begin to articulate our programs? Imagine two students who enter high school and say, "I studied Spanish for two years." One student had a teacher who was highly trained in standards-based and proficiency-based language instructional strategies using sound instructional practices based on second language acquisition theories. The other student came from a program that focused on stereotypical culture. They had fiestas, made piñatas, and visited Mexican restaurants. Obviously, these two students do not belong in the same class. But this is what happens now because we do not have a common measuring stick. STAMP is designed to be that common measuring stick.

In New Jersey and Louisiana, for example, STAMP has been used to facilitate articulation from eighth grade programs into high school. Using objective data, districts can grant high school credit, high school teachers can place students at the appropriate level, and middle school teachers receive detailed feedback on student performance that helps them reflect on curriculum and teaching practice.

There are also a number of schools throughout the U.S. using STAMP to facilitate articulation from grade eight to grade nine. Because of the standards-based and proficiency-based focus of STAMP, as well as age-appropriate assessment items, STAMP can also be a tool for placing sixth graders with a FLES background going into seventh grade into the language class suited best for continuing progress in language proficiency. K–6 program models (e.g. Immersion and FLES Sequential, and their respective variations of FLES program models) can be better articulated with the upper grades using an assessment tool such as STAMP. Even though a PreK–6 version of STAMP is yet to be developed, PreK–8 foreign language teachers can base their curriculum, units and lessons on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and student foreign language standards that in the future will be evaluated through a common measuring stick: STAMP.

Dynamic Activity Templates (DATs)

Assessing students does not make them more proficient; it just tells you how far they have progressed. DATs are online teaching materials developed specifically to help students reach higher benchmarks. However, these are not traditional materials. Rather than being fixed in a particular order, like textbooks, they are accessed by searching a database. Once you identify a DAT you like, you can either print it out or download it onto your computer as a Word document. Once it is downloaded, it is yours! You can delete vocabulary your students do not have, add special things you are working on, or personalize the activity with students' names or local references. Once a textbook is printed, you cannot change what is on the paper, but with DATs, every teacher has the power to customize activities to meet the needs of students. These materials can be used to supplement an existing textbook or combined to create units and courses independent of a textbook. To see some sample DATs, go to <http://www.onlinells.com>.

QuizPak

STAMP measures student performance while DATs help teachers prepare them. The missing link is in-class assessment. Even if students are becoming proficient, teachers cannot be sure that they are ready for STAMP unless they have a way of checking their progress. QuizPak is a set of assessment items similar to the ones in STAMP in terms of format and basic content. Teachers can view these items and select the ones that are appropriate for their students. Then, students take the quiz online just as they would with STAMP. The reading section is graded automatically and the results are posted immediately. Future versions will even send the data out to your grade book program. The writing section requires teacher grading, but the process is expedited through online scoring guides.

The Future

All of the tools described above focus on learners aged 12 and older. CASLS hopes to secure funding to develop similar tools that are appropriate for language learners in grades PreK–6. The challenges of writing instructions and creating content that is age appropriate are significant. However, with the technology in place and the help of NNELL members who are experts in early childhood language learning, we believe that we can make a contribution by developing these tools. Luckily, the technology to deliver rich multimedia learning materials is beginning to take hold in many elementary schools. We look forward to partnering with NNELL and its members to help us make this dream a reality.

For more information see <http://CASLS.uoregon.edu>.

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