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Perceptions of the Culture and Communications Standards

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Abstract

This article discusses the impact of the Standards for Foreign Language Teaching in the 21st Century on language programs at American universities. Surveys were administered to American students and to faculty at a university in Spain asking questions about the five goal areas of the standards. Responses from these groups were analyzed and compared with responses of faculty at American institutions. Although most faculty informants in the U.S. and in Spain said they were familiar with the goals of the standards, findings indicate that grammatical accuracy is perceived to be the primary focus of language programs in the U.S. Faculty in the U.S. reported that they felt underprepared to teach culture and communication skills and unsure of the role of linguistics in the development of students' language proficiency.

Background

Now in its third edition, the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* has served as a guide for the profession for more than 15 years (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 2006). Although the standards were originally developed for P-12 educators, the list of endorsements and contributors includes state, regional, and national language organization, as well as classroom teachers and post-secondary faculty across the P-16 spectrum; and many colleges and universities embed the standards in their programs of study. The process of developing and implementing these national standards guided the profession as the teaching paradigm shifted away from a focus on form (DeMado, 1993; Shrum & Glisan, 2005, pp. 67-69) and educators transitioned from thinking of language learning in terms of “how (grammar) and what (vocabulary)” to “knowing how, when, and why to say what to whom” (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 2006, p.11). The interrelated nature of the five goals—communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities, known collectively as the 5Cs, encourages the integration of different modes of

communication with culture as learners develop both linguistic and cultural proficiency. Collectively, the standards emphasize the importance of learners' engagement with the language of study, requiring that students participate in conversations; provide, obtain, present, and interpret information; express feelings; exchange opinions; demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between cultural products, practices, and perspectives; use the language to acquire information; demonstrate understanding of concepts of culture and language; and show evidence of language use beyond the classroom (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 2006, p. 9). It has become common practice for textbook writers to include references to the standards, thereby drawing attention to the five goal areas and emphasizing their importance in language teaching and language learning.

Prior to the publication of the standards, Horwitz (1988) found that beginning language students believed that the most important part of acquiring proficiency in another language was learning grammar and vocabulary. More than 20 years later, while it may appear that the profession is guided by the integrated goals of the standards, there is evidence that grammar still is perceived to be the most important element in language teaching. When Brown (2009) compared student and teacher beliefs about effective language teaching, the greatest statistical difference related to the teaching of grammar. University students enrolled in elementary- and intermediate-level language courses believed that effective foreign language teachers should use activities to practice grammar points rather than to exchange information. Brown posits that student interest in grammar may result from a discrepancy between the way students are taught and the way they are tested, and Cheatham (2008) calls for a change in instructional content and testing strategies. In other words, although teachers may believe that classrooms should be communicative, they may test students for grammatical accuracy. Moreover, Wilbur (2007) reminds the profession that knowledge about the standards does not guarantee that teachers understand how to integrate the standards into curriculum planning, instruction, and assessment; and integrating the standards into instruction and assessment may not guarantee that students recognize or value the goals.

The role of culture in language acquisition is also a perennial question. In the Foreword to Seelye's (1991) *Teaching culture*, Morain reports that in 1971 ACTFL offered its first pre-conference workshop devoted to the teaching of culture. Four decades later at the 2008 ACTFL conference, attendees heard about ongoing work on a cultural proficiency exam. However, despite this remarkable progress, cultural proficiency is not universally perceived to be an important part of language acquisition. In a recent study by Brown (2009), college students rated cultural knowledge significantly lower in importance than did their instructors; and Wilkerson (2006) found that college faculty perceived the study of culture as tangential to language learning. Met (2008) stated that only 30% of teachers feel prepared to teach culture, and she told of frequent discrepancies between teachers' self-perceptions of what they teach and the true definition of culture. She noted that what is taught as culture is often superficial rather than integrated and

interrelated, and culture is taught in ways that do not relate practices, products, and perspectives as described in the standards.

The authors of this article have backgrounds in language teaching and teacher education. On several occasions we have been asked how our teaching has evolved over time in light of the standards. It was during one of those discussions that we decided to investigate the impact of the standards beyond our own personal experiences and beyond our own classrooms. We planned to poll American university students and ask about their experiences with the standards. We selected students who had completed some language course work in the U.S. and were using their language proficiency while abroad. We compared their responses with those of faculty outside the U.S. who were teaching them, and we triangulated our findings by interviewing teachers and college faculty in the U.S. Our goal was to use the findings from our study to inform our own teaching and to share with the profession our insight into the role of the standards in language teaching in the U.S.

Methodology

During the summer of 2007, we led 36 students from 13 different American post-secondary institutions on a 6-week study abroad experience to Spain. All students were required to live with host families and to enroll in art, culture, grammar, history, or literature courses taught by native Spaniards at the local university. We also required that two graduate students participate in seminars that we facilitated on special topics in foreign language methodology.

We designed a questionnaire for the Spanish faculty asking about American students' strengths and weaknesses in the areas addressed by the standards (see Appendix A). The survey was distributed and collected by administrators from the university. We designed a separate survey for our students. In the student survey we briefly described the standards and asked what the students learned while in Spain (see Appendix B) and what American university faculty could do to better prepare students in each area. Comparisons of the findings from the faculty and student questionnaires would help us understand how well the standards were integrated into programs of study in the U.S. and offer insight into needed areas of improvement.

Students returned their surveys to us immediately, and we were able to conduct follow-up interviews to confirm our findings. The faculty surveys were returned to the university administrators and forwarded to us several months after we left the country. Aware of the need to verify our emerging findings but unable to contact the respondents, we decided to ask language faculty at American institutions to serve as reviewers. The discussion during the first meeting was so insightful that we continued to ask language faculty to review and verify findings at multiple points during the preparation of this manuscript. The contributions of the reviewers in the U.S. and their candid comments have enriched our understanding of contemporary teaching practices and the role of the standards.

Comparison of Responses from Spanish Faculty and American Students

Eleven Spanish university faculty members responded to our survey. They had an average of 14.5 years experience teaching Spanish as a foreign or a second language with a range of between 8 and 20 years. The majority (82%) reported that they were familiar with the five principal concepts of the standards (n=9 yes, n=2 no) and that their university had similar goals (n=9 yes, n= 2 no). At the end of the 6-week study-abroad experience, the students were given a similar survey (see Appendix B). Among the students, 10 (28%) said that they were familiar with the standards and 26 (72%) said that they were not. When asked whether their institutions used the 5Cs, 17 students (47%) said yes, 12 students (33%) said no, and 7 students (19%) did not respond or said that they did not know. Our original intent was to compare responses of Spanish faculty with those of students and study similarities and differences. However, we quickly noted that most differences related to only two topics: grammar and culture.

Communication and Grammar

When asked to describe any weaknesses they noticed in American students' speaking and writing abilities (Standard 1: Communication), seven of the Spanish faculty listed developmental issues normally overcome by time and experience, such as pronunciation problems, a tendency to translate literally, limited vocabulary, and a lack of oral practice. Four respondents commented that students had excessive preparation in grammar, that they were unfamiliar with conversational and textual cues, and that they were unable to comprehend colloquial or informal discourse. In essence, students were perceived to know more about grammar rules than about how to communicate in Spanish.

When students were asked how the study abroad experience enhanced their ability to communicate in the presentational, interpretive, and interpersonal modes (Standard 1), their most frequent answers were (1) through practice speaking with Spaniards, (2) by acquiring new vocabulary, and (3) by studying grammar. When asked about areas of communication for which they still felt under prepared, students responded that they were not confident initiating conversations and that they were concerned about their grammatical accuracy. It is noteworthy that grammar and vocabulary featured prominently in responses in every category. Later in the survey, students were asked to describe what they learned about their own language by studying in Spain. In their comments, students described themselves as "ignorant" of English grammar. They equated their inability to recite English grammar rules with ignorance of English grammar, and, likewise their ability to state Spanish grammar rules with knowing Spanish.

Culture

Spanish faculty were asked to comment on students' ability to make connections between the relationship between cultures and languages. They

responded that students made more cultural comparisons than they made grammatical comparisons, and student answers bear out this finding. When asked what they learned about their own language and culture by studying Spanish, students described negative aspects of American culture—Americans are stingy, picky eaters, uptight, conservative, focused on money, and workaholics.

When asked to comment on students' cultural proficiency, Spanish faculty said that American students had limited knowledge of Spanish culture, current events, and political and social situations in Spain. Faculty said that students were more familiar with Latin America than Spain and that they confused and conflated customs and cultures. Faculty also described students as behaving as if American culture were superior to other cultures. As was true in the previous section on communication and grammar, many of the perceived shortcomings can and will be overcome with time and experience. Moreover, the fact that the students were studying abroad can be taken as an indication of their commitment to learn more about other cultures. Indeed, 86% of students reported that they learned a lot about Spain's culture, geography, and politics, noting that not all Spaniards support bull fighting, that Spain has a royal family, and that Spain has a rich history of art and architecture.

Most students' comments about Spanish cultural products and practices focused on food and beverages, such as non-refrigerated milk and eggs, differences in hours for meals, and consumption of alcohol. However, student responses about Spaniards' ways of thinking, perspectives, and world view were very broad. When asked to comment specifically on what they learned about other world views, 72% of students responded saying that Americans are spoiled and egocentric, that Spaniards are uninhibited, and that both nations have similar problems. Students described Spaniards as more generous and passionate than Americans. They noted that Spaniards spent more time with their families than did Americans, they had more balance in their work and family responsibilities, and they were more open-minded than Americans. These comments show insight and the ability of students to observe behaviors and draw conclusions.

Faculty and Student Recommendations

When Spanish faculty were asked how professors in the U.S. could better prepare students for their travel to Spain, their suggestions were evenly divided between a need for greater cultural awareness and a need to teach communication skills rather than grammar. The same recommendations were made in student responses when asked how university faculty could prepare students in the standards. Nineteen of the student comments mirrored the responses by Spanish faculty, with 4 suggestions that faculty teach more culture and 9 requests that faculty teach grammar in more communicative ways, including speaking only in Spanish and using discussion of topics of interest to students rather than worksheets. Once again, comments on culture and grammar dominated the responses. The remaining comments requested that professors explain the standards, a trend also noted by Cheatham (2008), who described post-secondary instruction as isolated from the standards.

Discussion of the Findings

As we described earlier, we discussed our emerging findings with language teachers in the U.S. When we met with these reviewers, we began by asking them to complete the faculty questionnaire as they thought the Spanish university faculty had responded so that we could discuss perceptions and then realities. We then discussed their answers before we shared our emerging findings. Our most important discoveries occurred when we asked reviewers to imagine what they believed Spaniards felt were problems in written and oral communication. In every instance, reviewers listed discrete points of grammar: verb conjugations, noun-adjective agreement, accent marks, word order, pronouns, and prepositions. Reviewers were surprised that the Spanish faculty listed none of these problems and instead reported that grammar was overemphasized. When we told reviewers that student responses confirmed Spaniards' statements, reviewers countered that the textbooks they were obliged to follow were grammar-focused. They said they were unsure of how to teach interpersonal communication skills that students reported they wanted to learn, such as how to start and end a conversation.

Although reviewers accurately predicted that Spanish faculty would say that students had limited knowledge of other cultures, they did not mention a possible connection between students' shortcomings and classroom instruction and interaction. For example, when we revealed that Spanish faculty commented on the Spanish taboos against eating in class and stretching in public, several reviewers indicated that they were unaware of these prohibitions. At times reviewers appeared embarrassed as they explained that they had limited experience in a target country and knew little about Spain. When we asked how they taught culture, reviewers consistently compiled lists of isolated facts, an approach that we call *the flasher method* for the way it exposes students to random and often titillating tidbits of cultural information. Reviewers appeared to teach what was most familiar, obvious, or convenient. Although none of the reviewers or Spanish faculty mentioned relationships between products, practices, and perspectives described in the cultures standard, it should be noted that students were able to articulate a relationship between Spaniards' slower pace of life, commitment to family, and passion as well as how these practices and perspectives were integral to the Spanish world view. Based upon discussions with reviewers, we conclude there is still a lot of misunderstanding about the goals of the culture standard, and we hope that the findings from this study will show how well students notice relationships once they are immersed in the culture.

Most reviewers guessed that Spaniards saw students as self-centered and close-minded; and most Spanish faculty felt that students were ignorant of Spanish culture, politics, and current events. However, we must point out that by virtue of travelling abroad the students had made a step toward overcoming these behaviors and perceptions. Students' comments show that as a group they were attentive to Spanish culture. Students also noted that exposure to different world views and cultures showed them that Americans are not seen by everyone in a positive light. Their comments confirm that language students are interested in

expanding their horizons and that they are attentive to other world views. We hope that by pointing out these differences more faculty will address these issues with students and include these topics in lessons.

Implications for the Profession

Comparisons of responses from native speakers, students, and faculty indicate that at the post-secondary level, American language programs appear to emphasize grammatical accuracy as the most important element in learning another language. Early during one discussion with reviewers, one individual commented “If (students) know the grammar, they know the language and can get around in the country.” However, as the discussion continued, reviewers began to notice the interrelated components of culture and communication in language proficiency. Given this experience, we believe that language faculty may need overt instruction on how to teach culture as part of the language-learning process rather than as a separate entity or separate course in the program of study. For example, Abrate (2000) describes the teaching of culture as helping learners see culture as a film rather than photos so that learners are empowered to observe, analyze, and make cultural hypotheses. Szewczynski (personal communication, November 11, 2009) reminds language faculty who feel underprepared to teach culture that they do not have to know everything. They can, and should, collaborate with students to be cultural learners as part of their ongoing professional development (see also Szewczynski, 1998). Altstaedter and Jones (2009) show that students’ language proficiency and motivation are enhanced through the study of culture, and Hidalgo Calle and Alley (1999) offer examples of how to teach culture in ways that prepare students to be analysts, particularly in preparation for study abroad.

We also noticed that when discussing the communication standard, reviewers talked about the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) separately rather than in integrated activities. In their feedback reviewers said they did not feel prepared to integrate interpersonal, presentational, and interpretive modes of communication and they did not have a sufficient knowledge base to teach common discourse strategies. Faculty in the U.S. feel obligated to teach a grammar-driven curriculum, and the design and layout of textbooks may unwittingly reinforce the notion that grammar is the most important component of language.

Based upon our findings and discussions, we believe that post-secondary language programs in the U.S. continue to focus on grammar rather than communication. Educators overlook the crucial role of culture in linguistic proficiency, perhaps because of their own lack of preparation in culture. As a result, the misperception of language as grammar rules is perpetuated. On the positive side, student perceptions about their cultural and linguistic proficiency change as they spend time in the target country. Misperceptions and stereotypes can be overcome, and students are able to make accurate and meaningful observations about the target culture.

Future Research

During discussions and verification of findings with these reviewers, we noted that the faculty survey asked respondents to list student weaknesses in communication, cultures, and connections. The word *weaknesses* may have led respondents to believe that they had to describe students in negative terms, although there were multiple examples of what students could do well. None of the reviewers said anything about the wording nor asked whether we wanted only negative examples. However, we advise that the wording be changed if this study is replicated.

The students in our study were enrolled in 13 different post-secondary institutions, so the findings from this study have been generalized across all post-secondary language programs. A future project may focus on students from a single institution to determine whether the findings are similar. We are also aware of the limitations of trying to generalize from a qualitative study based on 36 Spanish students and 11 faculty respondents. Future studies might expand the number of participants or survey students about other languages of study.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire given to university faculty in Spain

5 Cs Entrevista—España

Nombre y apellido _____ **Fecha** _____

Número de años que enseña Ud. español _____

[Number of years that you have taught Spanish]

1. En los EEUU se basa la enseñanza de los idiomas extranjeros en cinco conceptos principales: la comunicación, las culturas, las conexiones, las comparaciones, y las comunidades.

¿Conoce usted estos conceptos?	_____ Sí	_____ No
¿Tiene su país conceptos parecidos?	_____ Sí	_____ No
¿Tiene su universidad algo similar?	_____ Sí	_____ No

[In the U.S., foreign language teaching is based on five principal concepts: communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities.

Are you familiar with these concepts?	_____ Yes	_____ No
Does your country have similar concepts?	_____ Yes	_____ No
Does your university have something similar?	_____ Yes	_____ No

2. Comunicación—Queremos que nuestros estudiantes puedan hablar y escribir en español. ¿Qué problemas nota usted que tienen sus estudiantes en comunicar? [Communication—We want our students to be able to speak and write in Spanish. What problems do you notice that your students have when they communicate?]

3. Cultururas—Queremos que nuestros estudiantes entiendan la manera en que piensan y viven los españoles, o sea, sus perspectivas, sus productos, y sus tradiciones. ¿Qué fallas nota usted en la capacidad de sus estudiantes de entender a los españoles?

[Cultures—We want our students to understand the way in which Spaniards think and live, in other words, their perspectives, products, and traditions. What weaknesses do you notice in your students' ability to understand Spaniards?]

4. Conexiones—Queremos que nuestros estudiantes reconozcan las perspectivas únicamente españolas. ¿Qué problemas nota usted que tienen sus estudiantes en entender el punto de vista español?

[Connections—We want our students to recognize the unique Spanish perspectives. What problems do you notice that your student have in understanding the Spanish point of view?]

5. Comparaciones—Queremos que nuestros estudiantes comparen su propio idioma y su cultura con la lengua y cultura españolas. ¿Nota usted algunos ejemplos de tales comparaciones?

[Comparisons—We want our student to compare their own language and culture with the Spanish language and culture. Do you notice any examples of such comparisons?]

6. Comunidades—Queremos que nuestros estudiantes usen el idioma extranjero fuera del aula de clase y para propósitos no-académicos, o sea, para divertirse, leer, et cétera. ¿Ha notado usted casos en que sus estudiantes empleen el idioma fuera del salón de clase?

[Communities—We want our student to use the language outside the classroom for non-academic purposes such as for enjoyment, reading, etc. Have you noticed students using the language outside of the classroom?]

7. ¿Qué aconsejaría usted a los *profesores* para mejor preparar a los estudiantes antes de viajar a España?

[What advice would you give professors to better prepare students before they travel to Spain?]

Appendix B

Student Survey on Standards

Feedback on Study Abroad Program in Spain

I give my permission to use my feedback in a research project to improve study abroad programs. My answers will not affect my grade.

Name _____ Date _____

1. In the United States there are standards for foreign language learning, called the 5Cs: Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. *Are you familiar with these standards? _____ Yes _____ No

*Does your school _____ use the 5 Cs? _____ Yes _____ No
[name]

2. Communication: Presentational, interpretive, and interpersonal skills

*What did you learn on this trip that helped your speaking and writing skills?

*What did you learn on this trip that strengthened your listening and reading skills?

*In what areas of communication do you *still* feel under prepared? What will you do to improve?

3. Culture: Products, practices, and perspectives of other cultures.

*What did you learn about the way that Spaniards think, their *perspectives* of life, and their world view?

*What did you learn about the *practices* of Spain, the traditions and rituals?

*What did you learn about the *products* of Spain used in daily life?

4. Connections with other disciplines

*Other than Spanish grammar, what did you learn about other subjects, such as politics, geography, math, etc.?

*What did you learn about other “world views”?

5. Comparisons of language and culture

*What did you learn about *your own language and culture* by studying Spanish?

6. Communities: language outside the classroom

*How will you continue to use Spanish *outside of school* for personal enjoyment and enrichment?

7. ADVICE: What advice would you give to *professors* to prepare students in the 5Cs?