

A Snapshot of their Beliefs and Practices: Perspectives of Mississippi and Alabama Spanish Teachers

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Abstract

As a result of the ACTFL/NCATE Program Standards for the Preparation of Foreign Language Teachers (2002) much progress has been made with regard to identifying what teachers should know and be able to do. A survey of secondary Spanish teachers in the 20 largest school districts in Alabama and Mississippi investigated teacher beliefs about their teacher preparation, proficiency, and practices within and beyond the classroom context. Results of the survey indicate a disparity between teacher beliefs and classroom practice. The results as well as implications for teacher education programs and professional development are discussed.

The paradigm shift that has occurred in foreign language teaching over the last 30 years reflects the increasing demand for students to participate in a global society. The move to communicative language teaching, as opposed to grammar-based language teaching, has brought with it many challenges. One of these challenges is how to prepare teachers to use communicative methodologies. Thus, in the past decade, the foreign language profession has worked to develop standards for foreign language teachers. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) in conjunction with the National Council of the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) developed the ACTFL/NCATE Program Standards for the Preparation of Foreign Language Teachers (2002). These standards provide a framework for what beginning language teachers should know and be able to do at the end of their teacher preparation program. The standards are used to determine whether teacher education programs merit recognition at the national level.

A concern regarding the standards is that they were developed through consensus of experts in the field rather than on empirical research. Recognizing the need for more empirical data to support what experts believe to be good language teaching, ACTFL launched a research priorities initiative to

identify the key areas in which research is currently needed in foreign language instruction and learning to inform and improve classroom practice; attract researchers to conduct research in these key areas; and sponsor this research through funding, publication, and dissemination of research results to the field and other stakeholders. (ACTFL, 2011, n.p.)

One area identified by this initiative is the need for model foreign language teacher preparation programs. Huhn (2012) provided a comprehensive overview on this topic calling for “longitudinal studies that empirically illustrate the performance of teachers who have completed an NCATE Nationally Recognized teacher education program” (p. S177). However, before these types of studies can be undertaken, it is important to examine the current programs in each state as well as the current beliefs and practices of foreign language teachers.

The purpose of this study is to examine teacher beliefs about their teacher preparation, proficiency, and practices within and beyond the classroom context in Alabama and Mississippi. First, a review of current literature will be presented followed by the research study data. A discussion of the results and implications for the future of foreign language education follow.

Literature Review

Pedagogical Knowledge

The Program Standards for the Preparation of Foreign Language Teachers (ACTFL, 2002) are rooted in the profession’s student standards. These same standards consist of six content standards which underscore the knowledge of language, literature, culture, and linguistics. Given this framework, the preparation of foreign language teacher candidates is no longer viewed as the sole responsibility of faculty in education. McAlpine and Dhonau (2007) and Pearson, Fonseca-Greber, and Foell (2006) emphasized the role of colleagues in departments of foreign languages in assisting teacher candidates in meeting Standards 1, 2, and 6.

It is clear that foreign language teacher education programs are making progress toward reaching the goals of the Program Standards (Shrum & Fox, 2010). Although it may be challenging, since 2005 when the first reports were submitted using the Program Standards, an increasing number of programs have been labeled as successful (Shrum & Fox, 2010). This trend continues to grow given that in 2010, 67% of the reporting programs were identified as receiving national recognition or recognition with conditions (NCATE, 2011). This is an increase from 47% in 2008, 25% in 2006, and 13% in 2005 (Shrum & Fox, 2010).

Although the number of foreign language teacher education programs that are using the Program Standards is increasing, there are far too many that fail to do so. Thus, while some states are meeting these challenging standards, others have made little progress in this area. This issue is further exacerbated given the quan-

dary of teacher shortage, which has directly influenced how interested individuals seek certification. Although the recent position statement of ACTFL (2012) encourages all programs, including alternate certification and added-on/endorsement, to use the Program Standards, there is no mandate that requires them to do so. This troubling fact causes us to ponder a question posed by Glisan (2001), "To whom will our teacher preparation standards apply? All, only traditional four- or five-year programs? Effective teachers. . . or warm bodies" (p. 166).

Content Knowledge

The first two Program Standards address the need for teachers to have strong content knowledge. Content knowledge for foreign language teachers is very complex because the teacher must not only possess a strong knowledge about the target language (grammar, pronunciation, etc) and culture (literature, art, music, daily life, etc) but must also have a high level of oral proficiency in that language. The Program Standards require teacher candidates to demonstrate oral proficiency at the Advanced-Low level.² The focus on oral proficiency is not surprising given its pivotal role in delivering communicative, standards-based instruction. Historically, among all components of subject-matter knowledge, proficiency in the target language has been emphasized (Lafayette, 1993; Pearson et al., 2006; Schulz, 2000).

The profession has continued to emphasize the importance of oral proficiency by recommending that the target language be used 90% of the time in the classroom (ACTFL, 2010). Likewise, the research priorities initiative highlighted the need for research in the area of teacher target language proficiency and its effect on student learning. Chambless (2012) highlighted the importance of a high level of oral proficiency in being an effective foreign language teacher. However, research in this area introduces some cause for concern. For example, Swender (2003) analyzed data from the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) and revealed that approximately half of the interviewees failed to cross the Intermediate High/Advanced Low border. This difficulty in reaching higher levels of oral proficiency is not surprising given research by Cooper (2004) and Fraga-Cañadas (2010) who found that oral and listening proficiency were given scant attention in teacher candidates' foreign language courses. Additionally, research (Hammadou-Sullivan, 2011) highlights the importance of exposure to the target language in a variety of contexts outside of the classroom in developing higher levels of oral proficiency.

In addition to the challenging nature of reaching high levels of proficiency, another issue has emerged from research. Although the Program Standards set Advanced Low as the requisite for NCATE-recognition, few states require a level of oral proficiency for certification. Conversely, data suggest that states are beginning to understand its role in effective foreign language teaching. For example, in 2011, 21 states required the OPI for certification compared to a mere seven states in 2004. However, only 16 of those states require the Advanced Low level while the other states set the requirement at Intermediate High (Chambless, 2012). Some states require demonstration of oral proficiency in certain languages but not in others. Although national standards exist, the application of them nationally is still quite varied. According to Chambless (2012), one reason for

the lack of uniformity in oral proficiency standards for FL teacher certification across states can be explained by dissonance between professional beliefs and practical reality: Some states may opt for the standard that can be achieved by most teacher candidates, whereas NCATE and other states have chosen a higher standard based on professional principles; still other states have decided not to take a stand. (2012, p. S145)

Much research is still needed to determine the best ways in which to help foreign language teachers improve their language skills. Chambless (2012) recognized the importance of needs analysis research to show how best to support foreign language teachers in maintaining and improving their target language proficiency in order to develop professional development guidelines recommended for in-service foreign language teachers.

In a previous study, Fraga-Cañadas (2010) developed and distributed a survey to measure the characteristics, beliefs, and practices of Spanish teachers in Ohio. The present study responds to her recommendation “to replicate the survey in other cities and states” (Fraga-Cañadas, 2010, p. 413). Although Ohio is among the 21 states that requires a minimum level of oral proficiency for certification in Spanish, Alabama and Mississippi are not. It is unknown whether these teachers will have similar convictions regarding foreign language teaching and learning as do their colleagues in Ohio. Investigating their beliefs, characteristics, and practices is vital considering the findings of Fraga-Cañadas (2010), which highlighted that the oral proficiency of teachers often declined following certification, and few teachers sought opportunities for professional development. Furthermore, according to NCATE (2012), Ohio has 17 nationally recognized foreign language education programs, which stands in contrast to Mississippi and Alabama, which respectively have one and zero nationally recognized programs. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do current Spanish teachers in Alabama and Mississippi, states without a language proficiency requirement, view their language skills/competence?
2. Do Alabama and Mississippi Spanish teachers engage in professional development or other practices to maintain and/or improve their proficiency?
3. What do Alabama and Mississippi Spanish teachers believe to be the most important characteristics of language teaching and learning?

Methods

The Spanish Teachers’ Survey (<http://kellymoser.blogspot.com>) was adapted from that designed and used by Fraga-Cañadas (2010), which consisted of 32 questions. The researchers who conducted the present study modified the original survey by adding questions regarding demographics (Question 1: Please check the district in which you teach Spanish.), certification (Question 3: How did you obtain your certification to teach Spanish?), proficiency (Question 9: Have you ever had your Spanish oral proficiency assessed?; Question 10: How was your Spanish oral proficiency assessed?; and Question 11: What did the results of your Spanish oral proficiency test indicate?), and professional development (Question 17: Are you aware of scholarships or grants for professional development as a Spanish teacher?; Question 18: Can you please share how you learned about these scholarships or grants?;

Question 19: Please describe the scholarships or grants for professional development which you have received.). These questions were added to elicit additional information regarding the participants and their teacher preparation programs. It should be noted that the survey used for Alabama teachers was identical to that distributed to Mississippi teachers with the exception of Questions 1 and 25, which included state-specific response choices.

The original study by Fraga-Cañadas (2010) included 106 Ohio Spanish teachers of one county. To reach a similar representative sample of Spanish teachers in Alabama and Mississippi, Spanish teachers in multiple districts were included. The survey was initially distributed online to the 10 largest districts in Alabama and an additional 10 in Mississippi. These districts were chosen based on the population data provided by the states' departments of education. The email addresses for participants were located using the school websites, and participants were contacted directly via email. Among the 121 Spanish teachers invited to participate in Alabama and the 78 in Mississippi, only 29 completed the survey ($n = 20$ Alabama; $n = 9$ Mississippi), resulting in a response rate of 17% (Alabama) and 12% (Mississippi).

In order to increase the response rate, the survey was sent a second time to an additional 10 districts from each state using the same population data from the states' departments of education. Among the total 161 Alabama and 103 Mississippi Spanish teachers invited to participate in both cases, 87 responded ($n = 59$ Alabama; $n = 28$ Mississippi), bringing the Alabama response rate to 37% and the Mississippi response rate to 28%. Although the results of this survey will be presented in the next section of this paper, it is vital to note that due to the limited number of participants and the self-reported nature of the survey, the data are suggestive rather than conclusive. Generalizing the results to other Spanish teachers in these and other states should be done with caution. Although these data must be interpreted with caution, they provide a timely snapshot of teacher beliefs and practices as the profession focuses on improved teacher preparation.

Findings

Specifically regarding the demographic information gleaned from the survey, the data revealed that the majority of respondents in Alabama and Mississippi were nonnative Spanish teachers (NNSTs). Among the 86 total responses (28 Mississippi teachers and 58 Alabama teachers), 71% of respondents in Mississippi ($n = 20$) and 90% in Alabama ($n = 52$) were NNSTs. In only three cases was a language other than English or Spanish identified as the first language. For example, two respondents reported being native German speakers (one in Alabama and one in Mississippi), and one Alabama respondent identified French as his or her first language. An overwhelming majority of Spanish respondents in both states (78% or 21 teachers in Mississippi and 85% or 50 teachers in Alabama) were female. Using the same categories as Fraga-Cañadas (2010) with regard to teaching experience (e.g., novice = 1-5 years; experienced = 6-15 years; veteran = 16 or more years), there was some disparity between Alabama and Mississippi. While the percentage of Mississippi respondents was similarly divided into each of the three categories, Alabama respondents included more experienced and veteran teachers rather than novice Spanish educators.

Regarding education level, Alabama was characterized by more respondents with advanced degrees than Mississippi. Only 32% of Mississippi respondents had a master's degree, compared to 75% in Alabama. Many respondents sought certification through an alternate route program or endorsement. In total, 68% ($n = 19$) of the respondents in Mississippi and 54% ($n = 32$) in Alabama sought alternate routes to certification. Regarding their academic majors, the majority of Alabama respondents (73%) reported Spanish or Education as their major; however, almost half of Mississippi respondents (48%) identified majors other than Spanish, education, or the dual concentration. Lastly, few Mississippi or Alabama respondents reported having taught Spanish beyond level two. Less than one-third of these teachers taught Spanish 3, 4, or AP. None of the Mississippi respondents reported experience with AP Spanish.

Language Competence and Target Language Usage

To answer the first research question regarding how participants in Alabama and Mississippi view their language skills, although few pursued certification via a traditional route, many respondents reported having had their oral proficiency assessed. Among the 61%, or 17 respondents in Mississippi referring to this experience, only two respondents referred to the OPI. Forty-four percent, or 26 respondents in Alabama, reported similarly; yet, only three cited the OPI. It is possible that Question 10 (How was your Spanish oral proficiency assessed?) and Question 11 (What did the results of your Spanish oral proficiency test indicate?) were not completely understood by survey respondents. Many qualitative responses did not appropriately address the question and included written answers such as *yes*, *in a lab*, and *excellent*. Still, approximately three-quarters of the respondents from Alabama (72%) and Mississippi (80%) assessed their own oral proficiency as either Advanced or Superior.

Concerning the evolution of their Spanish proficiency, approximately half of each state's surveyed teachers reported that their overall proficiency had improved since beginning their teaching career. However, other survey data conflicted with this finding. For example, more than half of the respondents (73% Alabama and 56% Mississippi) reported only occasionally or never speaking Spanish with a Spanish-speaking colleague.

The qualitative comments provided by respondents in both states indicated a lack of confidence or low oral proficiency which influenced their decision to refrain from using the target language in conversations with other Spanish teachers. For example, written responses included, *not my first language/lack of strong communication skills in target language*, *The other Spanish teacher at my school is a native speaker. Frankly, I have a hard time understanding her when she's speaking really fast, fear of making a mistake*, and *lack of confidence in speaking ability*.

It appeared that willing teachers were also uncomfortable speaking Spanish with their colleagues whom they believed would have difficulty understanding the conversation. For example, teachers commented, *worry that colleague won't understand, they are not proficient enough*, and *the other Spanish teacher does not feel comfortable speaking the language with me. I have tried, but it has not been successful*.

Concerning target language usage in the classroom, although data indicated that in most cases their use of the target language increased as learners progressed through the 1-AP sequence, the highest average percentage of target language usage was 88% as indicated in Figure 1.

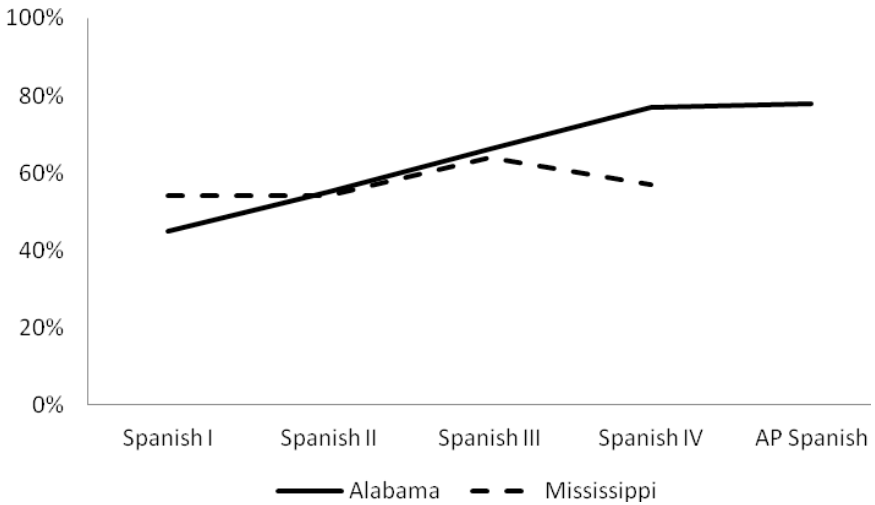


Figure 1: *Spanish Usage in the Classroom*

When asked to what degree teachers agreed or disagreed with statements regarding their proficiency, the majority of respondents in Mississippi (56%) and Alabama (73%) confirmed their lack of Spanish use while engaging with colleagues. This finding was surprising in view of the fact that the majority of both Mississippi (86%) and Alabama (86%) respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I frequently seek opportunities to speak in Spanish.”

Of Mississippi respondents, 95% either agreed or strongly agreed with the statements “I believe my listening proficiency has improved since I started teaching,” “I frequently seek opportunities to read in Spanish,” and “I believe my reading proficiency has improved since I started teaching”. It is interesting to note that, while 95% of Mississippi respondents agreed that they frequently seek opportunities to read in Spanish, when asked to describe their frequency of reading in the target language in a later question of the survey, more than half reported only occasionally or never/rarely participating in that type of practice.

Alabama respondents responded strongly to the statement that “whenever I come across a native speaker of Spanish, I try to speak Spanish with him or her” with 92% of Alabama respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement. Alabama respondents (90%) also agreed or strongly agreed that they frequently incorporate authentic materials to use in the classroom.

Professional Development and Practices to Improve Proficiency

In answering the second research question regarding their participation in professional development, the majority of respondents in both states have not participated in professional development directly related to Spanish or foreign language pedagogy. Only 32% of Mississippi respondents ($n = 9$) and 30% ($n = 17$) of Alabama respondents stated that they have attended a professional development opportunity

related to their content area, which reflects the findings of Fraga-Cañadas (2010). This finding, however, contradicts Pufahl and Rhodes (2011) who asserted that “73% of secondary schools with foreign language programs reported that their language teachers had participated in professional development or in-service training in their subject area...” (p. 268).

In Mississippi, responses ($n = 8$) included three references to the state language association conference. Additionally, two respondents mentioned the SCOLT conference, and one identified a TPR workshop. Furthermore, two respondents from Mississippi qualified departmental or district planning meetings with other foreign language teachers as professional development. Qualitative responses indicated that teachers were unsure of the pedagogical value of these opportunities. One participant responded that “[The professional development was at] most times not very helpful.” Alabama responses ($n = 17$) were more varied in terms of professional development activities and included TPR workshops, state and national conferences, study abroad, immersion programs, technology oriented professional development, and curricular/planning meetings. Three respondents specifically referenced a Spanish immersion program with the Super Teacher Program, a free week-long summer institute for 4th–12th grade teachers offered through the Alabama Humanities Foundation.

It is worth noting that the majority of the professional development activities reported by Alabama and Mississippi respondents were related to Spanish pedagogy rather than improving content knowledge including oral proficiency. The most frequent justification provided by respondents in both states for their lack of participation was their unawareness of available Spanish related professional development opportunities. As research (McAlpine, Cheatham, Dhonau, & Lytle, 2007; Patrick, 2009) suggests, time issues, costs, and distance were among the other reported reasons. Fewer than 50% of Mississippi respondents reported belonging to any sort of professional organization. Alabama respondents reported a slightly higher rate of participation in professional organizations with 59% of the teachers who indicated they were members of foreign language education professional organizations.

When asked to indicate the frequency with which they engaged in common practices to maintain their proficiency (Table 1), Alabama respondents cited listening to music (62%) and having entire conversations in Spanish (62%). Alabama respondents (67%), however, reported chatting online in Spanish to be their least frequent activity. Data from Mississippi respondents indicated a lack of preference with regard to their practices outside of the classroom since over half of the respondents ($n = 22$) either occasionally or never/rarely engaged in any of the listed activities. It is interesting to note that both in Alabama and Mississippi, at least half of the respondents indicated that they either frequently or almost always participated in entire conversations in Spanish, and yet more than half of those surveyed are not having these conversations with their colleagues.

Table 1

Practices Outside the Classroom (% of Respondents)

	Never/Rarely		Occasionally		Frequently		Almost Always	
	AL	MS	AL	MS	AL	MS	AL	MS
Read a book in SPN	27	14	46	50	15	23	12	14
Read magazines, news reports in SPN	17	9	42	46	33	27	7	18
Watched TV in SPN	15	14	44	46	29	32	12	9
Watched a movie in SPN	21	10	35	48	33	29	12	14
Listened to music in SPN	8	5	31	46	44	14	17	36
Had entire conversations in SPN	8	5	31	46	6	27	15	23
Surfed the Internet in SPN	25	18	29	41	35	18	12	23
Chatted online in SPN	67	27	14	36	14	18	6	18
Wrote letters to friends or colleagues in SPN	41	41	37	14	12	27	10	18

Important Characteristics for Spanish Teaching and Views of Teacher Preparation

Regarding the third research question, although the majority of respondents in both states considered all characteristics listed in the survey to be important, Mississippi respondents (95%) considered knowledge of Spanish grammar to be either important or very important. They also ranked the statement “Being able to comprehend oral and written media in Spanish” as equally valuable (95%). Alabama respondents (94%), on the other hand, considered the ability to interact successfully with native speakers to be the most important characteristic.

In order to put their aforementioned beliefs into their proper context, it is essential to examine the respondents’ perceptions of their teacher preparation program. Although Mississippi (61%) and Alabama (64%) respondents concurred regarding the role of grammar in their teacher program, they also indicated that they were well-prepared regarding reading (Alabama, 61%; Mississippi, 64%) and writing (Alabama, 54%; Mississippi, 64%). Approximately half of Alabama (58%) and Mississippi (54%) respondents reported being prepared only to some extent regarding speaking. Additionally, Mississippi (46%) and Alabama (57%) respondents felt equally ill-prepared in foreign language methodology.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine Mississippi and Alabama Spanish teachers’ beliefs about their teacher preparation, proficiency, and practices within and beyond the classroom context. Several key findings emerged which provide the opportunity to delve into the issues affecting foreign language teacher preparation in both Mississippi and Alabama. First, it should be noted that over half of the teachers responding to the survey sought certification through an alternate route program.

Since these programs are often not characterized by the same academic rigor as traditional programs seeking NCATE-accreditation, it can be assumed that these teachers may not have been held accountable for mastering content related to language, literature, linguistics, culture or content-specific pedagogy. According to the respondents' analyses of their teacher preparation which seemed to emphasize reading and grammar, scarce attention was devoted to the development of listening or speaking proficiency, cultural knowledge, or foreign language methodology.

In order to accomplish the communicative goals emphasized in today's model of language learning, teachers must demonstrate a minimal level of oral proficiency. Chambless (2012) underscored this essential component and stated "certainly, a teacher's oral proficiency in the TL [target language] is not the sole determining factor in student achievement, but it has been generally accepted as an essential characteristic for effective teaching" (p. S142). Given this claim, the role of proficiency and the teachers' self-assessment of their oral competence should not be overlooked. It is of concern that approximately half of the participants reported their oral proficiency as either static or declining. Yet, this finding is consistent with research by Fraga-Cañadas (2010). Furthermore, Swanson (2012) found that low self-efficacy is directly related to teacher attrition.

It is curious that most of the participants assessed their proficiency as either Advanced or Superior. Their comments regarding their lack of confidence using the target language contradict their self-assessed high levels of oral proficiency. Given research related to the difficulty in reaching these levels, as well as the few responses specifically citing the OPI, it is likely that these teachers were unfamiliar with the OPI and the description of each proficiency level. To this end, if teachers are unaware of these levels, it would be difficult for them to accurately assess their own linguistic ability. Likewise, it can be logically assumed that student performance is not assessed using the student proficiency guidelines, and realistic expectations for language learning are not discussed with language learners.

Given the conflicting data concerning teacher oral proficiency levels, a look at their classroom practices may be a key area for additional research. Data from this study revealed that these Spanish teachers failed to use the target language frequently during instruction. Although in most cases their use of the target language increased as the level of Spanish became more challenging, nearly all teachers still fell short of ACTFL's recommended 90% target language use. Research indicates that low levels of oral proficiency as well as a lack of confidence in their oral skills are reasons that teachers rely on the first language in the classroom (Batemann, 2008; Cooper, 2004; Fraga-Cañadas, 2010; Franklin, 1990). Furthermore, the apparent lack of experience teaching more advanced language classes may also have adversely impacted the development of the teachers' oral proficiency. According to Fraga-Cañadas (2011) this lack of experience "might give teachers a sense of security, [but] it would, at the same time, create a plateau effect for their target language abilities, especially their speaking proficiency" (p. 298). In addition to the lack of target language usage in the classroom, another indication of their oral proficiency levels is the fact that the participants not only chose to refrain from using the target language consistently while teaching, but these teachers also opted to avoid participating in authentic conversations with their Spanish-speaking colleagues. Their qualitative responses indicated

that they were aware of their own linguistic deficiencies which directly impacted their decision to abstain from these practices.

Since research (Donato, 2009; Fraga-Cañadas, 2011) highlights the role of professional development on the instructional practices of teachers in general, the data related to this phenomenon are especially troubling. On average, only one-third of the participants engaged in any professional development activity. In most cases, these opportunities to enhance one's knowledge about the field were focused on pedagogy rather than improving content knowledge. Such a finding is disquieting in light of the number of teachers in these states that reported that their proficiency had not improved since certification. It is plausible that opportunities for professional development which focus on honing communicative ability are few and far between (Fraga-Cañadas, 2010). However, since approximately half of the teachers in both states indicated that they were not members of any professional organization, it is also probable that this finding can be explained by lack of involvement in state, regional, and national associations for foreign language teachers. Additionally, this particular finding may be directly related to their reported lack of self-confidence while speaking in the target language as well. Swanson (2012) highlighted the relationship between membership in language associations and teachers' perceptions of efficacy in content knowledge.

Although the data from this study highlight many obstacles in teaching according to today's exciting new communicative paradigm, it should be mentioned that these teachers are not solely to blame for these shortcomings. In Alabama and Mississippi, there is only one nationally-recognized NCATE-accredited program of foreign language education. Furthermore, at least half of these teachers sought certification via an alternate route. Thus, these teachers were most likely never held accountable for knowledge of language, literature, culture, linguistics, and language-specific methodology. Additionally, these states have not mandated a set level of oral proficiency for certification in a foreign language. Is it fair to expect these teachers to implement the most effective practices if they have not had the opportunity to experience them as language learners and prospective teachers?

In light of this study's findings, it is clear that post-secondary faculty need to assist prospective foreign language teachers so that they are confident using the target language frequently both within and beyond the classroom. According to Veléz-Rendón (2006), "language learning is a long, complex process and much of language acquisition happens outside the confines of the classroom, therefore candidates must seize every opportunity available to them to enhance competencies" (p. 331). Since half of all teachers, regardless of the state, reported that their proficiency had not improved following certification, all language teachers should be encouraged to transcend the artificial classroom boundaries and consistently seek additional exposure to the target language. Perhaps, taking advantage of technology to design professional development opportunities specifically for language teachers could assist them in improving their proficiency level. Furthermore, these opportunities may also provide teachers with the necessary support from other educators as they continue to improve their language skills and alter their instructional practices.

Although professional development is essential in influencing effective instructional practices, there must be a concerted effort to improve both traditional

and alternate route foreign language teacher education programs. Should prospective teachers be held to the same academic rigor regardless of the pathway to certification? How might this affect teacher licensure in states like Mississippi and Alabama where there is a high demand to fill foreign language teaching positions? Will there be enough “warm bodies” in these classrooms if alternate- and endorsement programs require a demonstration of oral proficiency and knowledge of language, literature, culture, and linguistics?

Improving foreign language teacher education relies not only on the active participation of faculty responsible for preparing these teachers, but also upon the states that grant them certification. Beginning with state-level mandates, Huhn (2012) underscored the importance of setting the standard of oral proficiency, and this very requirement might be one of the initial steps in improving foreign language teacher preparation in these states. Additionally, given these teachers’ lack of confidence using the target language as well as their assessment of their preparation programs, it is evident that those responsible for foreign language teacher education must restructure the programs leading to certification. In order to reframe foreign language programs, it is essential to highlight that language courses at all levels must continue to emphasize communication. Wilkerson, Schomber, and Sandarg (2004) emphasized this very notion and asserted that “the standard undergraduate language curriculum must be reexamined to determine if higher-level proficiency elements are incorporated into classroom goals and activities” (p. 39). Since teachers reported feeling ill-prepared with regard to listening and speaking, many post-secondary faculty are clearly not addressing the communicative goals of language instruction. Furthermore, it can be assumed that given their dearth of cultural knowledge, those responsible for preparing these teachers may not have recognized the vital role of the National Standards at the post-secondary level.

Although there is much progress to be made, improving foreign language teacher preparation is a worthwhile endeavor. Not only does the level of oral proficiency impact the instructional practices of language teachers, but it also directly influences student language development. Chambless (2012) underscored this crucial fact and contended, “it seems reasonable to assume that students would probably not advance in oral proficiency beyond the level of proficiency of their teachers” (p. S156). By using the Program Standards to reframe foreign language teacher preparation, we can assist teachers in reaching set proficiency levels, focus on the three communicative modes, provide them with the fundamental content knowledge regarding linguistics, literature, culture, and methodology, and at the very least, we can prepare them for the communicative demands of the 21st century language classroom.

Notes

¹ It should be noted that the ACTFL/NCATE Program Standards are currently under revision and will be available in Fall 2013.

² For additional information regarding the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (2012) see <<http://actflproficiencyguidelines2012.org/>>.

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