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Plenary Speeches

Foreign language standards and the contexts of communication

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Once upon a time, there were four skills. But what did it mean to be a listener? A speaker? A reader? A writer? Skills in a vacuum are useful neither for describing how well one uses language nor for how to teach it effectively. As the Standards were developed, the task force made an effort to look at related disciplines and to investigate how their methods might inform the teaching of second languages. As the discipline of communication was studied, the role of context became evident. For example, the speaker as rhetorician was quite distinct from the speaker in interpersonal or small group communication. The rules that governed those behaviors and the way students were taught to speak in these two situations differed considerably. What are the ramifications for how we look at communication in foreign languages? The answer is 'The Framework of Communicative Modes'.

1. Introduction

In 1996, *The Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century* was published in a volume that set forth a set of eleven standards organized under five goal areas, a rationale for their designation, and some sample progress indicators and learning scenarios that represented world languages taught in US schools. Almost immediately, language-specific organizations were eager to align these standards with documents that reflect the particular constructs and issues related to their language groups. In 1999, a second edition appeared with a slightly different title reflecting the passage of time. *The Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* included the original standards text and added applications to nine languages (Chinese, Classical Languages, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish). The third edition (abbreviated to *SFLL* 2006) was published with Arabic added; standards development work is underway in Swahili, Yoruba, and Hindi. As this paper is the first in a series to be delivered at the University of Wisconsin during the coming year, a bit of history and context for development of standards might be informative.

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- The foreign language standards were developed under a federal grant associated with the *Goals 2000: Educate America* act which underwrote the development of 'content' standards for K-12 education in a number of disciplines. The government's definition of a content standard was that it described 'what students know and are able to do'. While not mandatory that foreign languages participate in standards-setting, many language educators felt that if the profession opted out, efforts to place greater emphasis on language study in schools could not succeed.
- The developmental work of the project, initially a collaborative effort of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), The American Associations of French, German, Spanish and Portuguese (AATF, AATG, AATSP respectively) was conducted by a Task Force that devoted three years to a consensus-building effort that included researching the field of theory and practice, drafting standards, gathering input from educators and other stakeholders, revising, and finally presenting to the profession.
- In the early 1990s, the profession was engaged in debating paradigms such as language proficiency, communicative and other competencies, and whether to focus on input or output, form or meaning, literature in advanced courses or languages for special purposes. These paradigms were not in diametrical opposition to one another, yet most discussion would have led one to believe that this was the case. In order to achieve consensus around the standards, the Task Force worked to locate the commonalities upon which one could build a research-supported set of standards, if not a research-generated product.
- The final presentation of the standards resulted in a configuration that is commonly referred to as the Five Cs, which represent the goals for foreign language learning: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities.

2. The five Cs: communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, communities

The Five Cs logo of circularly connected circles (see Figure 1 in Heidi Byrnes' article 'Articulating a foreign language sequence through content: A look at the culture standards' in this issue of *Language Teaching* (41.1, 103–119), page 106), each representing a goal area, conveys a message – it is not just a decorative symbol. The five goal areas are not intended to be viewed as separate entities, nor are they meant to be emphasized in a preordained sequence. These five goal areas do not suggest a curriculum that builds communicative skills in early years and then layers on culture or literature or specialized content in more advanced courses. Teachers who endorse the concepts of the Five Cs encourage students in foreign language classes to engage in all these goals at all levels. They envision that as communicative abilities develop so does student capacity to deal with more complex cultural perspectives. The interaction among these goal areas creates for teachers, and for students, a richer learning experience, one that envisions effective language outcomes and proficiency as well as restoration of a foundation in the humanities and cultural content. Defining areas beyond communication is intentional, not incidental. For the full text of the Five Goal Areas and the eleven standards associated with them, see any of the editions of the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (1996, 1999, 2006) or go to http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3324 (accessed 2/7/2007).

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3. Communication as a goal area

With that background, let us explore how the standards have served to reshape the area of communication, perhaps the area with which we are all most familiar in language teaching in the USA. Since the early days of audiolingualism in the 1960s, a four-skills orientation has always been the basis for discussion of language learning. Emphases change as research or curricular outcomes focus on one skill or another (e.g., reading prior to the 1950s, audiolingualism in the 1960s with its so-called natural order of skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing).

The insights generated through an historical and research review within the Standards Task Force reached beyond practices in second-language education into the heart of the discipline of communication itself, where it soon became clear that the missing element was context. The four skills, whether in an audiolingual or a proficiency-oriented paradigm, do not exist in an artificial, pristine environment where listening is limited to listening. One listens and speaks with others; or one listens and has to process meaning on one's own from a news broadcast. For learners as well as communicators at large, contexts for communication are quite distinct; they require different strategies to derive meaning, and they require different instructional support for learners. As we looked at each of the four skills, it was unanticipated, unexpected – yet on the other hand obvious – that the addition of context to skill enhanced our previous view of communication. An examination of a university course catalog for a department of communication will list offerings such as Interpersonal Communication, Rhetoric and Persuasion, Public Speaking and the like. These courses treat communication as differentiated types of speech acts. Extending into theoretical and curricular practices of writing and interpretive reading in both English and foreign language departments underscores the role modalities play and that are now explicit in the standards. Thus, the Framework of Communicative Modes came into being (*SFLL* 1996: 33), to delineate the '3.1 *Goal Area of Communication*. Communicate in Languages Other than English'. The supporting standards are:

- INTERPERSONAL. Students engage in conversations, provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, and exchange opinions.
- INTERPRETIVE. Students understand and interpret written and spoken language on a variety of topics.
- PRESENTATIONAL. Students present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners or readers on a variety of topics.

4. The Framework of Communicative Modes

The framework is used to explain the three communicative contexts in which the skills are embedded in the standards. Each of the traditional four skills exists in two of the three modes – listening and reading are interpersonal or interpretive, speaking and writing are interpersonal or presentational:

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4.1 Interpersonal communication

This mode refers to the learner as a speaker/listener or reader/writer. It requires two-way interactive communication where negotiation of meaning may be observed. The exchange will provide evidence of awareness of the socio-cultural aspects of communication as language proficiency develops.

4.2 Interpretive communication

This mode views the learner as a reader or listener/viewer working with 'text' whose author or deliverer is not present or accessible. It presumes that the interaction is with authentic written and oral documents where the language input is meaningful and content laden. The learner brings background knowledge, experience, and appropriate interpretive strategies to the task to promote understanding of language and content in order to develop a personal reaction.

4.3 Presentational communication

This mode places the learner as speaker or writer for a 'distant' audience, one with whom interaction is either not possible or limited. The communication is set for a specified audience, has purpose and generally abides by the rules of genre or style. It is a planned or formalized speech act or written document, and the learner has the opportunity to draft, get feedback, and revise before publication or broadcast.

To illustrate these modes in action, reflect for a moment on your own communicative abilities in languages you know well and less well. Can you state in global terms of proficiency what kind of a listener you are? Or do you have to explain by saying, 'Well, I understand most conversational talk, and I can understand a film on DVD when I can replay it several times, but I can't get much out of live broadcasts of the evening news, and I just dread phone calls with digital directions.' Interpersonal listening and interpretive listening are quite distinct tasks. Ways in which the listener can negotiate in interpersonal mode ('I didn't understand', 'Could your repeat that?', 'I don't understand the word . . .') cannot be replicated to clarify meaning from the news anchor or the mysterious recorded voice instructing you to push various buttons.

5. Instructional implications of the three communicative modes

The standards are intended to define performance outcomes for language learners not curriculum, methodologies, or approaches (i.e., 'What students know and are able to do' was the mandate in the US legislative act that funded standards development). While many approaches may lead to standards-based outcomes, not all approaches will do so. The configuration of the Framework of Communicative Modes and the outcomes stated in

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the standards do entail certain instructional considerations. Issues that apply to the three communicative modes include those discussed in the remainder of the present section.

5.1 Interpersonal mode

At first blush, the interpersonal mode appears to be the most familiar and to represent the type of teacher/student or student/student or person-to-person interactions that have long dominated both the foreign language classroom and conversation in the real world. However, as one looks at the growing body of research that attempts to capture and record classroom communication, one begins to see the complexities of this mode. Instruction can identify the interpersonal mode as a goal as well as a tool to explore the other modes. When there is a need to measure performance in this mode as a goal or outcome of instruction, the proficiency guidelines are informative. Moreover, the Oral Proficiency Interview can serve as a measure, although historically it has been used to measure just the speaking part of the communication. Adaptations of interview techniques can extend this type of tool so that the learner as speaker and as listener is taken into account in assessment. Interpersonal communication is also a learning interaction that advances competency in the other modes and in the learning of content. It serves as the platform for providing input, for negotiating meaning, and for allowing the learner to practice and experiment in the construction of meaning. It differs greatly from the question/answer formats so prevalent in past instruction; it seeks to emulate real conversation without artificial instructional rules such as 'answer in a complete sentence' when that is not necessary.

As stated earlier, the standards were not generated by the research, but implementation requires attention to research in the various goal areas, and instructional practices should be connected to implications of research. For example, instructional ties to theories and research are evident as the interpersonal mode is developed; interpersonal communication may be between teacher and student/s or student-to-student. In the former situation, teachers assume the role of an 'expert' who negotiates meaning and creates a scaffold to help students learn (Vygotsky 1978). One might also envision teachers as providers of the comprehensible input in Krashen's (1982) hypothesis; Swain's (1985) output hypothesis could also be envisioned in practice since students are speaking, trying out rules as they attempt to provide meaning, and not just listening.

The standards, now a decade old, have stimulated some research, although there was already a movement toward looking more closely at classroom communication. As the complex interactions of the interpersonal mode are being better understood, ideas for working within it more effectively are forthcoming. For example, Johnson's (1995) study of classroom communication and her use of 'scripting' was eye-opening in its revelations of teacher behaviors that promoted successful classroom interactions and of those that thwarted them. Hall (2001) has consolidated her research and that of others into a foreign language methods text based upon interpersonal dynamics and the community of the classroom. A growing body of contemporary research provides keen insights into how interpersonal communication differs dramatically from drill-type language and the usual question/answer format that has typified classroom instruction (and all too commonly continues to do so).

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Finally, while the interpersonal mode plays out primarily as a speaking/listening skill set, it also encompasses reading/writing when parties use these skills to interact. In today's world of e-mail, instant messaging, and text messages, opportunities to communicate and exchange information abound. Language learners may find that opportunities to interact with native speakers increase as they exchange in written form; studying the effect of these informal negotiations and the effect they may exert on language learning is an area ready for much more research.

5.2 Interpretive mode

Interpretive communication presents the reader/listener with a set of tasks different than these skills require in the interpersonal mode. The originator of the communication is not available to the learner; he or she cannot restate, slow down, or explain. The message is set as a written or recorded document. The access to meaning is not through interaction with the creator but with the document or text itself. Teaching toward this mode builds upon the implications from research focused on areas such as reader response theory, effective strategies for comprehending and interpreting meaning, and discussing literary, film or other cultural texts. It is also important to note that the term INTERPRETATIVE was deliberately selected rather than reliance on the more traditional term used in testing and instructional materials, COMPREHENSION. Interpreting involves personal intellectual or affective engagement. To accomplish this, students must go beyond understanding the words and phrases to 'read between the lines'. It requires that documents contain content worth the students' intellectual or emotional reaction, questioning, and curiosity to read or to listen or to learn more.

Among the classroom implications, the use of AUTHENTIC TEXTS at all levels provides the language, cultural, and cognitive content that makes meaningfulness primary. Certainly these texts must be selected with care so that the students' linguistic competency is balanced with background knowledge, interest, and strategic competencies in ways that render the task challenging but not frustrating. The advice to EDIT THE TASK NOT THE TEXT encourages instructional practice where students develop effective interpretive strategies such as contextual guessing, hypothesizing and confirming or revising those as one builds meaning. The last twenty years have produced extensive research into reading, listening, and viewing for meaning, and the power of narrative and context has been well established. A newer element that is surfacing focuses on using characteristics of genre and also the underlying framework of the document to facilitate understanding. Teachers are beginning to exploit the discourse patterns found in biography, interviews, narrative and the like to expand the repertoire of interpretive tasks appropriate to language level and age.

5.3 Presentational mode

The spontaneity of communicative exchange embodied in the interpersonal mode for the speaker or writer disappears in the presentational mode – where deliberateness, accuracy in choice of words and structure, adhesion to rules of formality and expectations of genre

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and audience hold center stage. In terms of interdisciplinary connections, presentational communication enjoys a strong research tradition and a body of effective practice in English/language arts, public speaking and related areas (e.g., broadcasting, journalism) and an increasing one in second languages. On many US college campuses initiatives such as Writing Across the Curriculum and even Speaking Across the Curriculum have imparted to students a process approach to writing upon which foreign language teachers can build.

The 'process approach to writing' paradigm has spun off a whole series of research projects that focus on identifiable aspects of the sequences. In English, in communication, and in foreign languages, research into the impact of audience identification, the establishment of a purpose for the writing or speech tasks, learning the characteristics of genre and how to fulfill its parameters have all produced valuable insights into the context for presentational communication. The stages involved in process writing may be even more critical for second language learners than for those writing or speaking in their first. These processes include:

- generating ideas, a key phase to insure that our students have the lexicon for their work;
- drafting, the first step toward combining ideas into connected discourse;
- obtaining feedback from the instructor or peers allows for improved communication of ideas and of more accurate language;
- revising to promote the clarity of ideas needed when one cannot negotiate meaning, i.e., the product must stand on its own;
- publishing to keep the focus on real world performance for an audience.

The various classroom learning tasks that may be done in presentational mode expand the types of written or oral presentations from the traditional composition or speech created for an audience of 'the teacher'. Presentational products should represent the spectrum of real world communication; they parallel publications or speech acts such as brochures, advertisements, letters to the editor, or journal entries and are created with purpose, audience, and genre in mind.

6. Integration of the three modes

As a starting point, it is important to understand the specific characteristics of each of these modes. For purposes of teaching or research, one must be able to distinguish between speakers in interpersonal communication and speakers before an audience, readers of interpersonal messages and readers of set texts. Equally important are the strategies that pertain to each mode because, in a certain sense, language learners must be prepared to be independent communicators who draw upon the most appropriate ways to obtain or convey meaning.

Once understood as distinct modes, teachers will then be able to integrate them in instruction and with content that furthers achievement in the other goal areas – especially culture, connections, and comparisons. The knowledge base of the communicative modes enables teachers to facilitate and to select from a repertoire of techniques. Here is a brief example of how this integration of modes and attention to the other goal areas of the Five

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Cs play out in a classroom where the central topic is a universal one, 'coming of age', where the content has a cultural base in France/the Second World War, and where the primary goal area is one of interpretive communication of a film: Louis Malle's *Au revoir les enfants*. However, communication also occurs in interpersonal and presentational modes.

6.1 Interpretive tasks blended with interpersonal communication

1. Previewing. Students watch a clip from the film, first without sound, which takes place in a restaurant.
2. Students describe the scene in the target language. Background of the place, time, context.
3. Then students watch the clip several times and discuss. Who are the characters in the scene? What are their roles and relationships?
4. Students narrate what they see on the screen. What are the actions? In what sequence do they occur?
5. Students interpret the scene in terms of conflict, dénouement, and conclusion.
6. Students express their personal reaction to the clip.

These steps may be done as full class discussions or in small groups or pairs.

6.2 Interpersonal idea sharing in preparation for a personal narration

1. Students reflect on a personal event where a situation with family members caused tension. They fill in a graphic organizer provided by the teacher to make notes on the background: place, time, and context.
2. In the organizer they identify a) the people or characters, b) their roles and relationships, c) physical descriptions
3. Students outline the key actions and the sequence of events.
4. Students work in pairs and talk through their notes with a partner and get feedback on missing elements and what they might want to clarify or expand.
5. The student 'author' discusses his or her perspective on the conflict, the situation, and the dénouement. The listening partner gives his or her interpretation.
6. Students share their feelings about this past event at that time and now.

6.3 Presentational communication: Tell your story, Write your script

1. Students choose to write either a script that can be acted/read (as in Readers' Theatre)[1] or a story about the awkward family event. They may also choose to do an oral narrative which would be partly prepared as a presentation with the goal of building toward spontaneous story-telling.

2.a. If a script, students first draft the roles, gather their acting crew together and revise dialogue as needed. Rehearse and videotape.

[1] Readers' Theatre is an event where participants assume roles and read from scripts. There are no props, scenery, or costumes. Generally, 'actors' sit on stools or chairs and present the script and character through intonation and other voice modulations.

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2.b. If written, students draft their narrative and have it read by at least one classmate for feedback before revising it. They do the final version with titles, visuals or other stylistic touches that make the short story a good publication.

7. Conclusion

This brief exploration of the Communicative goal in the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (1996) attempts to explain both the development of the standards and the paradigm created to change the traditional view of four skills in language learning. This expanded view of communicative language has generated both insights into acquisition and questions for further research or experimentation in practice. The Framework of Communicative Modes with its evolution toward delineating the all important context for skills that was missing in the past has the potential to transform – and in many cases has already transformed – the ways in which we teach and assess. This writer envisions a future in which the terms listening, speaking, reading, and writing cease to dominate as titles of exercises or test segments, or in course titles, or in lists of objectives. It would constitute a major change if the profession would give the communicative event itself prominence in work with learners as they develop competencies in the three areas of interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational communication.

In terms of research, it is important to clarify again that the standards were not research-generated, i.e., there was not a body of research that directly determined what the standards should be. The standards were derived from a combination of curricular and instructional goals amenable to a wide range of stakeholders and in tune with real world expectations for the study of world languages. However, as the goal areas came into focus, it was then important that the statements could be supported by research. In this sense, the communicative standards were formulated to be compatible with the findings and implications of contemporary research.

Finally, the Five Cs have a synergy so that each interacts with and amplifies the others. The communicative goals cannot be developed in a vacuum; conversation about nothing or about the trivial contributes neither to substantive language use nor to an engaged environment in the language classroom. The preference is that interpersonal communication should be about content, and content should be much more than 'what one does on weekends'. The content should be appropriate to cognitive development and relate to expanding the knowledge base of learners in terms of the culture, other disciplines, and the community of language users. To interpret texts requires that the texts have value, that they are worth the effort of understanding and reacting, and that they expand the knowledge base of students in any relevant area. Presentational communication can reach to audiences beyond the teacher and beyond the classroom composition to take advantage of the multiple ways ideas are presented in today's world – including the lecture presentation of this paper, where the author prepared (in writing) an oral presentation, and the live and distance audience patiently interpreted the speech. All then switched to interpersonal communication as follow-up questions were asked orally and through e-mail, where ideas could be negotiated and understandings clarified. Finally the oral plenary was revised for this publication – so all the modes were activated at different times and with varying emphases.

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