Lang. Teach. (2012), **45.4**, 515–526 © Cambridge University Press 2012
doi:10.1017/S0261444812000249

Thinking Allowed

National Standards: Research into practice

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1. Introduction

The *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century (SFLL)* (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project [NSFLEP]), originally published in 1996, were envisioned by many as the panacea for providing a new and exciting direction for foreign language education in the United States. The perceived impact of these National K-16 Student Standards has been witnessed throughout more than a decade by scholarly works that have acknowledged their role as 'a veritable change agent' (Sharpley-Whiting 1999: 84), 'a vision for foreign language education in the new century' (Allen 2002: 518), and, more recently, as 'a blueprint and framework for change' (Terry 2009: 17). The research that has been done on the Standards since their inception has attempted to provide concrete ways for the field to embrace this new framework and thereby realize a Standards-based curriculum and perhaps even revolutionize language education. This work has consisted largely of (1) implementational research (both with and without experimental design) that proposes specific strategies for addressing the Standards in planning, teaching, and assessment (Schwartz & Kavanaugh 1997; Abbott & Lear 2010); (2) survey research that analyzes self-reported information regarding teachers' pedagogical beliefs about the Standards and ways in which they claim to be addressing Standards in their classrooms (Allen 2002; ACTFL 2011), and (3) White papers that disseminate opinions and insights by leaders in the field regarding the impact that the Standards are having in areas such as language instruction, curriculum and course design, and educational policy (Sharpley-Whiting 1999; Donato 2009; Glisan 2010).

The Standards consist of five goal areas (or five 'Cs') that set out the rationale for language study – Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, Communities – together with Standards for each goal area reflecting what students should know and be able to do (see the Appendix for a summary of the *SFLL*). More than a decade after the release of the Standards, it is time to question whether the research carried out on them has enabled the vision to be realized, or at minimum, whether it has had any impact at all on the status of language instruction in K-16 classrooms throughout the US. This paper will begin to address this issue by contemplating selected research on the National Standards in terms of three different research/teaching relationships: areas in which the research is not applied or not applied well, areas in which the research is reasonably well applied, and areas in which

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444812000249 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the research is over-applied. Each of the three categories will include a summary of key research and a discussion of how it fits into that particular category. The topics addressed are oral interpersonal communication, the Communities goal area, extended sequences of language instruction, integration of authentic texts, and matching of classroom activities to the Standards.

The insights that I will share, which stem from my own areas of interest and expertise, apply to K-16 classrooms. This paper will end with a brief look at the nature of the research that has been conducted on the Standards and implications for future research that holds potential for influencing classroom practice. Although the focus of this paper is necessarily limited in scope, it will hopefully serve as the catalyst for further discussion and debate regarding the degree to which research on the Standards is informing and advancing Standards-based instruction in K-16 language classrooms in the US.

2. Research findings that have not been well applied

2.1 Oral interpersonal communication

The *SFLL* (NSFLEP, 1996, 1999, 2006) represent the goal area of Communication in terms of the three modes – interpersonal, interpretive, presentational – to reflect the context and purpose of interaction in the world beyond the classroom; see Standards 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 in the Appendix. In this framework, the modes are set out in an integrated fashion instead of as the traditional discrete skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For example, individuals often interpret an oral or printed text (interpretive mode), discuss it with someone (interpersonal mode), and may feel prompted to present information about the topic to others (presentational mode). In the interpersonal mode, according to Standard 1.1, 'Students engage in conversations, provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, and exchange opinions' (NSFLEP 2006: 9). Research on this Standard has posited a sociocultural explanation of interpersonal communication, based on the belief that our linguistic, cognitive, and social development is facilitated through interaction with others in a community of practice (Vygotsky 1978; Hall 1999). Learners become socialized into language activities and routines in the classroom as a result of their interaction with fellow classmates (Hellermann 2006). Within this sociocultural framework, interpersonal communication requires speakers to negotiate meaning with one another (Long 1996), engage in appropriate talk-in-interaction using tools such as turn-taking (Hellermann 2007; Hall 2010), and interact with others in real-life conversations that feature opening utterances, ellipsis (i.e. not repeating information that is known), related lexical items, and expressive reactions (Hall 1999, 2004). To this end, research on the oral interpersonal Standard has stressed the need for classroom teachers to involve language learners in 'developmentally rich communicative activities that challenge their linguistic and cognitive capabilities' and thereby promote the types of interactions necessary for developing communicative competence (Hall 1999: 36).

Unfortunately, oral interpersonal communication has not been integrated effectively into language classrooms, largely because teachers do not understand the features of interpersonal communication or how it develops in learners. Consequently, teachers often misconstrue

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444812000249 Published online by Cambridge University Press

interpersonal communication as synonymous with any type of pair or group task. Further, they confuse it with presentational communication, that is, activities such as reciting a dialogue from memory, reading aloud a scripted role play or dialogue, or engaging in a pair activity in which both speakers know what the other will say. While it could be said that there is now greater use of a 'context' in lessons (e.g. 'Making weekend plans'), in general there is still a predominance of grammatically-focused activities in US language classrooms, with little attention paid to larger communicative goals or talk-in-interaction. Insistence on accuracy and the production of complete sentences in a vacuum stands in sharp contrast to what it means to communicate interpersonally.

There is some empirical evidence to support this anecdotal evidence regarding the absence of oral interpersonal communication in classrooms. For example, a growing body of research studies reveals a predominance of teacher-centered presentation of texts and teacher talk in classrooms, which in turn compromises opportunities for communicative interaction, negotiation of meaning, and practice of advanced-level proficiency functions (Donato & Brooks 2004; Mantero 2006; Zyzik & Polio 2008). Similarly, other studies have found classroom discourse to consist largely of topically disjointed talk and limited student involvement (Hall 1995, 2010) as well as being focused primarily on the grammatical agenda of the teacher (Toth 2004, 2011). Additionally, research on the Standards-based Integrated Performance Assessment (IPA) at both the secondary and post-secondary levels revealed students' performance to be inferior in the oral interpersonal mode as compared to the other two modes and acknowledged the lack of sufficient opportunities to interact meaningfully in classrooms (Adair-Hauck et al. 2006; Glisan, Uribe & Adair-Hauck 2007). Interestingly, in a recent survey conducted by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) to assess the impact of the *SFLL* on classroom practice, the majority of respondents indicated that the goal area that was easiest to teach was Communication. However, open-ended comments disclosed misconceptions about this goal area inasmuch as respondents referred to the traditional four skills rather than the three modes of communication, they defined communication as language forms – 'vocabulary and grammar' – and acknowledged the role of the textbook in teaching it (ACTFL 2011). These results point to a lacuna between teachers' perceptions that they are in fact teaching the interpersonal mode and the actual absence of oral interpersonal communication in classrooms. The situation has most likely occurred as a result of three factors: (1) teachers' lack of understanding of the research on how oral interpersonal communication develops, (2) teachers' lack of oral proficiency in the target language necessary for orchestrating meaningful oral interaction, and (3) the reality that it is simply easier for many teachers to conduct discrete-point, grammar-based practice than to engage learners in stimulating, topic-driven interaction.

2.2 Communities Standards: Participating in multilingual communities at home and around the world

Perhaps the most visionary of the five goal areas of the *SFLL*, Communities combines elements from the other Standards and focuses on (1) language as a tool for communication with other

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444812000249 Published online by Cambridge University Press

speakers of the language in schools, the community, and abroad, and (2) language as a vehicle for information and interaction with others (NSFLEP 2006). Magnan (2008) suggested that the Communities goal area be situated as fundamental to the other goal areas since it is the one that most directly responds to the primary goal of the Standards for language learning, that of preparing learners to function effectively with members of the target cultures. The body of quantitative and qualitative research that has been published on the Communities Standards has focused on the impact of community-based, or service learning, as an avenue for enabling language learners to interact in target-language communities for specific purposes such as doing volunteer work. These studies have revealed the impact of community-based learning in helping learners generate a willingness to communicate in the target language (Pellettieri 2011), engage in interdisciplinary learning (ter Horst & Pearce 2010), and participate in civic engagement and social action by connecting language, content, and experiences in the community (Abbott & Lear 2010). In his study on bilingual internet chat, Darhower (2006: 96) stresses the need to add to the Communities Standards the concept of enabling learners to 'engage in intercultural communication in the target language BY BECOMING ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS IN A COMMUNITY OF SPEAKERS OF THE LANGUAGE' (emphasis in the original).

While there are 'pockets' of service-learning projects underway in language programs, the Communities goal area has been described as 'the lost C' since it occupies a far from central place in language curricula (Glisan et al. 2010). In the ACTFL (2011) Standards impact survey mentioned earlier, the Communities goal area was identified as the 'most difficult to teach' of the five goal areas. The overwhelming majority of respondents interpret this goal area as requiring teachers to take students into the local community or abroad, which is often not feasible or too difficult. Further, the majority expressed concern that the goal area is 'too nebulous, out of their control, and not assessable' (ACTFL 2011: 34). Interestingly, few respondents acknowledged the role of technology in addressing Communities. In addition, instructors of teaching methodology courses admitted devoting the least amount of time to Communities, and teachers reported having the least amount of professional development on this goal area (ACTFL 2011).

The growing number of studies on the Communities goal area, which have examined the impact and feasibility of service learning and the use of technology, have yet to influence classroom practice in a significant way. Furthermore, we are certainly far from responding to the call of some researchers to reexamine the role of community in terms of sociocultural theory, thereby acknowledging its role in creating the language mediation that is pivotal for language acquisition (Magnan 2007). This situation is particularly disappointing in light of the fact that language learners themselves attribute primary importance to being able to participate in target-language communities (Magnan, Murphy & Harris 2011). Perhaps through greater opportunities for professional development on the Communities goal area and integration of it into methods courses, teachers will acquire the knowledge and skill necessary to give it the attention that it deserves. Undoubtedly, however, we are still faced with the challenge of prying teachers away from the comfort of a grammar-driven curriculum and textbook and helping them to reexamine their belief system about the bigger picture of language education.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444812000249 Published online by Cambridge University Press

2.3 Extended sequences of language instruction: A national policy issue

The cornerstone of the National Standards is that 'ALL students will develop and maintain proficiency in English and at least one other language. . .' (NSFLEP 2006: 7). The *SFLL* 'presume that sequential study for an extended period of time is the ideal for achieving the highest levels of performance in the five goal areas, and the progress indicators also assume that instruction has begun in the early grades and continues throughout the secondary years. . .' (NSFLEP 2006: 22). The 'sample progress indicators' define in a measurable way student progress in meeting the Standards at the end of grades 4, 8, and 12 (and 16, in the case of most languages that have applied these Standards to their own contexts). For example, a sample progress indicator for Cultures 2.1, Grade 12, is 'Students identify, examine, and discuss connections between cultural perspectives and socially approved behavioral patterns' (NSFLEP 2006: 51).

Although a detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, a large body of research has confirmed the benefits of extended, uninterrupted sequences of language instruction that begin in the early grades (see, for example, Donato et al. 2000; Birdsong 2006; Curtain & Dahlberg 2010; Donato & Tucker 2010; Shrum & Glisan 2010). Further, many studies have correlated the number of years of language study to students' ability to reach specific oral proficiency levels (for a review of these studies, see Shrum & Glisan 2010); in short, there appears to be a relationship between length of uninterrupted study and gains in oral proficiency (see, for example, Glisan et al. 2007). In addition to the research dealing with the cognitive and linguistic benefits of extended language study proposed by the Standards, the US government has also recognized the critical need for a multilingual citizenry. For instance, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan publicly acknowledged that our students 'need stronger skills to compete with students in India and China' (US Department of Education 2009). For the Standards-based vision of language education to be realized, Donato & Tucker (2007: 257) stress that 'foreign language educational policy must be responsive to the realities of K-12 instruction in US schools today'. To this end, research that documents the successes and challenges of K-12 language programs must help inform and shape national foreign language educational policy.

It is indeed disappointing and unfortunate for our country that all of the research and apparent national interest in languages has not been sufficient to effect change in national policy regarding language study. The recent foreign language enrollment survey conducted by ACTFL (2010) revealed that only 18.5% of all students were enrolled in language classes at the K-12 level during the 2007–2008 academic year. Further, in most states the majority of students who enroll in language courses are in grades 9–11, after which a sharp decline in enrollment occurs in grade 12 and often in grade 11 (M. Abbott, personal communication, 27 June 2011). This parallels the situation at the post-secondary level according to the 2009 survey of Enrollments of Languages Other Than English in US Institutions of Higher Learning, conducted by the Modern Language Association, which showed a dramatic differential in enrollments between lower-level and upper-level classes (Furman, Goldberg & Lusin 2009). The survey also revealed that, since 1965, enrollments in languages have fallen substantially in proportion to the expanding number of students attending colleges and universities. Sadly, the historical trend to marginalize language instruction in the US

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444812000249 Published online by Cambridge University Press

continues, since in the current climate of cutting educational budgets, foreign language programs once again find themselves among the first to either receive reduced funding or be eliminated totally. This situation stands in sharp contrast to that of many other countries where students study one or even two foreign languages, beginning in elementary school (Kennedy et al. 2007).

Even in school districts where programs are begun in the early grades, longitudinal studies have illustrated that it is a challenge to sustain them over time due to internal factors such as program administration, teacher recruitment, and curriculum development, as well as external factors such as pressure to devote time to preparing for state testing in other subject areas, expectations of parents, and pressures from other language teachers (Donato & Tucker 2010). A key factor seems to be the degree to which the early language program is situated within the curriculum and daily culture of the school rather than being an 'add-on' that is an easy target for elimination (Donato & Tucker 2010). In sum, while the research on this aspect of the Standards clearly supports long sequences of uninterrupted language study, the US has not yet invested in this kind of national educational policy, be it for fiscal or philosophical reasons or both.

3. Findings that have been well applied

3.1 Integration of authentic texts

Woven throughout the National Standards is the learner's ability to interpret authentic texts, as the vehicle for developing interpretive communication skills, understanding the products, practices, and perspectives of target cultures, making connections to other disciplines, making linguistic and cultural comparisons, and interacting in target-language communities (NSFLEP 2006). In our professional literature, AUTHENTIC TEXTS have been defined as 'those written and oral communications produced BY members of a language and culture group FOR members of the same language and culture group' (Galloway 1998: 133, emphasis in the original). Historically, language teachers tended to integrate the texts that were presented in textbooks; i.e. those that were written for foreign language students and sanitized to include primarily the vocabulary and grammatical structures that had been previously learned. Teachers avoided authentic texts because they perceived that they were too difficult for learners, and teachers lacked pedagogical knowledge of how to guide learners through these texts to construct meaning.

Research done on the *SFLL* over the last decade has featured the use of authentic texts as central to Standard-based language programs. This work has justified the inclusion of authentic texts to address specific Standards, exemplified types of authentic texts that can be accessed in various media forms (e.g. video, audio, and internet), and proposed strategies for engaging learners in interpreting authentic texts (see, for example, Schwartz & Kavanaugh 1997; Amores & Medley 1998; Abrate 1999; ter Horst & Pearce 2010). Classrooms have embraced authentic texts in the ways suggested in this research, most likely because these materials are more readily accessible through the internet and other technologies, textbooks have done a better job of incorporating them, and pedagogical training and materials have

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suggested specific strategies for integrating authentic texts into classroom practice (Shrum & Glisan 2010). It is much more common today to observe a language class in which the teacher conducts pre-reading/pre-viewing/pre-listening activities, brainstorming about the text's message, skimming and scanning, and discussion of the text's main ideas and key details in an effort to engage learners in interaction with an authentic text. These texts are being used not only to practice interpretive skills but also as a tool for acquiring new information and accessing cultural and interdisciplinary content. Authentic texts are also more frequently included in Standards-based assessments (Adair-Hauck et al. 2006; Glisan et al. 2007).

4. National Standards research findings that have been over-applied

4.1 Matching of classroom activities to Standards

The majority of the research on the Standards has proposed specific activities or strategies that could be implemented to address particular Standards, such as those mentioned throughout this paper. It is clear that language teachers are beginning to make connections between their classroom practice and the *SFLL*. In the ACTFL (2011) Standards impact survey, 59% of respondents indicated that they have responded to the Standards primarily by connecting their current classroom activities to the Standards or by connecting the content of their textbook or curriculum to specific Standards. It is now not only common but expected that new textbooks will label activities according to the goal areas or Standards addressed.

Glisan (2010: 7) warns the profession that, while a first response to addressing Standards is naturally a 'matching' of our current classroom activities to the Standards, perhaps we are becoming too comfortable in this 'matching-exercise approach' to integrating the Standards into our classroom practice. This over-application of the research has resulted in teachers and textbook writers labeling everything as reflecting the Standards, though the connections are often superficial. Teachers and administrators may be growing too confident that their programs are Standards-based when in fact all they have done is attach new labels to existing curricula and classroom practices. Donato (2009: 269) has acknowledged that Standards 'labeling' has become rampant in Standards-based teacher education programs, which 'often reveals profound misunderstandings of pedagogical concepts in the standards'. In the ACTFL (2011) Standards impact survey, only 34% of respondents indicated that they have implemented a Standards-based approach in which their planning is based on Standards rather than on textbook content. This matching/labeling exercise that has been over-applied may be getting in the way of true implementation of Standards-based programs.

Perhaps teachers would not resort to over-applying current research if the field were to produce research on the student learning that results from beginning with a Standard and planning instruction around it in a backward-design fashion. This type of approach would keep desired learning outcomes in focus and show that students are indeed attaining the Standards (Wiggins & McTighe 2005). As a result, it might guide teachers to focus more on the progress their learners are making in meeting a particular Standard, rather than devoting effort to matching their current practices to the Standards.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444812000249 Published online by Cambridge University Press

5. Conclusion

Perhaps because the National Standards are still in their infancy in the US, research on the Standards has not yet been significantly reflected in national foreign language educational policy, curriculum/course design, or classroom practice. It appears that the profession is still in the initial stages of interpreting the Standards and taking preliminary steps to apply new research to instructional settings, mostly at K-12 levels. On the positive side, there has been an increase in the opportunities for professional development on the Standards, as well as in the design of instructional materials focused on them. The *SFLL* are making their way into foreign language teacher preparation programs and methodology textbooks.

In conclusion, two caveats must be mentioned. First, most of the research in the area of the National Standards has been 'Standards related' instead of 'Standards focused'. For example, study-abroad research is indeed related to the Communities goal area, but is never specifically addressed to the Communities Standards to answer a question such as 'Does study abroad lead students to become life-long learners who use the language for personal enjoyment and enrichment?' (NSFLEP 2006: 66). Again, research on content-based instruction (CBI) is indeed research on the Connections goal area, but is seldom directed specifically towards the Connections Standards to explore a question such as 'To what extent does CBI enable learners to recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its cultures?' (NSFLEP 2006: 56). Secondly, the little research that has focused on the Standards has consisted of implementational work and lacks a research design or an evaluative component. That is, many of the published works do not include evidence that a particular approach or strategy to address the Standards has resulted in student learning or progress in achieving a Standard.

Given that it has been some fifteen years since the initial publication of the National Standards, I propose that it is now time to engage in Standards-focused research that could take the form of (a) teacher action research projects, (b) qualitative or quantitative classroom studies, or (c) large-scale multi-site studies on a national level. What sort of specific research questions are begging to be explored in Standards-focused research? An action research project could engage a teacher in exploring interpersonal communication (Standard 1.1) to respond to the question, 'What are teacher perceptions of what counts as interpersonal communication in the classroom?' Another area that could be examined is the Communities goal area, to explore the question, 'How can students' success in interacting with members of the target-language community be assessed?' A qualitative classroom study could examine how well students meet the Cultures Standards and the kind of instruction that leads students to recognize the connection between practices and products and cultural perspectives. A quantitative classroom study could compare students' oral proficiency levels at benchmark points with the opportunities they have to engage in interpersonal communication. The National Standards publication includes progress indicators for grades 4, 8, 12, and 16, which define student progress in reaching the Standards and are 'measurable and assessable in numerous ways' (NSFLEP 2006: 28). A large-scale study could attempt to answer the questions 'Are students meeting these progress indicators as specified in the Standards for each grade level?' and 'Are these progress indicators realistic expectations for students at specific stages in their language learning?'

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The over-arching purpose of these various types of Standards-focused studies might be to determine if the Standards realistically represent what learners can achieve in specific contexts, where the Standards might need to be modified or further elaborated, and how they can best be translated into classroom practice that results in positive outcomes for language learning.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr. Richard Donato, University of Pittsburgh, for his feedback on this paper.

Appendix: Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century

COMMUNICATION: Communicate in Languages Other Than English

Standard 1.1: Students engage in conversations, provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, and exchange opinions.

Standard 1.2: Students understand and interpret written and spoken language on a variety of topics.

Standard 1.3: Students present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners or readers on a variety of topics.

CULTURES: Gain Knowledge and Understanding of Other Cultures

Standard 2.1: Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied.

Standard 2.2: Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the culture studied.

CONNECTIONS: Connect with Other Disciplines and Acquire Information

Standard 3.1: Students reinforce and further their knowledge of other disciplines through the foreign language.

Standard 3.2: Students acquire information and recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its cultures.

COMPARISONS: Develop Insight into the Nature of Language and Culture

Standard 4.1: Students demonstrate understanding of the nature of language through comparisons of the language studied and their own.

Standard 4.2: Students demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own.

COMMUNITIES: Participate in Multilingual Communities at Home and Around the World

Standard 5.1: Students use the language both within and beyond the school setting.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444812000249 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Standard 5.2: Students show evidence of becoming life-long learners by using the language for personal enjoyment and enrichment.

Source: National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project (NSFLEP) (2006). *Standards for foreign language learning in the 21st century (SFLL)*. Lawrence, KS: Allen Press, p. 9.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444812000249 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444812000249 Published online by Cambridge University Press