

The Challenge of Foreign Language Teacher Preparation

Addressing State Teacher Standards

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Foreign language teachers have very specific needs that are not easily addressed by generic teacher education programs or easily described by generic teacher standards. One fundamental difference from other subject areas is that foreign language teachers are attempting to teach a second language while using that very language as the mode of instruction. Since "the medium is the message," unique challenges arise for teachers and learners. Many subject area teachers struggle to speak less themselves and organize more student-centered activities. However, only the second language teacher has the added challenge of creating activities for students in which both the content and the language to talk about the content are, together, the lesson.

Beginning teacher standards are designed to encompass teaching at all levels (K-12) and in all areas, and they do not always translate well into foreign language-specific terms. Novice teachers in particular have trouble creating discipline-specific exemplars of the general competencies described in such teacher standards. A case in point is the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium's Beginning Teacher Standards that have been widely adopted by states across the country for use during teacher preparation and professional development. Standard #1 states: "The teacher understands the central concepts, tools of inquiry and structures of the disciplines he or she teaches and can create experiences that make these aspects of subject matter meaningful for students" (Council of Chief State School Officers 1998). Novice teachers are particularly hard pressed to interpret the broad, abstract language of the standard into explicit instructions for what they should be doing. They need help interpreting what the "central concepts" or "structures" or "tools of inquiry" are in

their discipline. That is especially true in foreign languages, in which the traditions of the discipline come from such varied sources as linguistics, anthropology, history, art, and literary studies.

Significance of Discipline-Specific Teacher Standards

Some states are increasing the pool of teacher candidates by providing fast tracks to certification for candidates with degrees in the subject matter but not in education. Others are increasing the amount of subject matter coursework required for certification. Both strategies underscore the importance of subject matter knowledge, which was emphasized by the widely cited Carnegie (1986) and Holmes Group (1986) reports. Undoubtedly, knowledge of subject matter is a basic prerequisite for foreign language teaching. One might think, as a result, that improving teaching in foreign languages would be as simple as finding the next educated native speaker of the target language. However, native speakers, although fluent in the nuances of the language, may be woefully inadequate at teaching. Moreover, they may lack experience in American culture and understanding of American educational goals and assumptions. Speaking the language well is only one part of what makes a good language teacher.

The specifics of "pedagogical content knowledge" (Shulman 1986, 4) in foreign languages are left unstated in generic, abstract teacher standards. Unlike high-profile disciplines such as math and English language arts, teacher educators in foreign language teacher preparation have had to work without support, in isolation, to create foreign language-specific versions of new generic teacher standards. At times this has even

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meant abandoning more language-specific assessments until they could be aligned to the new standards. In small teacher preparation programs lacking a foreign language teacher educator, beginning teachers must interpret independently the new standards to the best of their abilities. Unfortunately, foreign language methods courses "are very often taught by individuals with specialization in literary analysis or theoretical linguistics, but with neither teaching experience at the K-12 levels nor training in second language acquisition theory and applied linguistics" (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages 1998). In states facing a shortage of qualified language teachers, novice teachers may first be given a teaching assignment and then told to find a course in methods.

Meeting the Need for Foreign Language-Specific Pedagogy

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' on-line teaching methods course is one project currently under development that models a partial solution to problems that novice teachers face. In conjunction with Weber State University, in Utah, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages will provide a state-of-the-art methods course that will bring together a faculty of nationally recognized experts in the field of foreign language education. They will teach preservice foreign language teachers who otherwise might not have such a domain-specific course (see "Special Projects" at <www.actfl.org>).

The use of a national faculty to design and deliver the course will provide novice language teachers with a wealth of specific pedagogical content knowledge, eliminating their need to guess at how to apply generic concepts to their discipline. New teachers will be able to access current research on second language reading comprehension, listening comprehension, error correction, oral proficiency development, and sequencing of instruction for heritage learners of a language. Students will benefit by learning from a team of expert scholars representing best practice in foreign language research and pedagogy. Small institutions where low enrollments in foreign language education make offering a language methods course difficult will be prime beneficiaries of the new model. Institutions that license the course will enroll their own students but have access to the on-line course materials. Training of local facilitators will be conducted on-line and, if interest permits, an ongoing discussion forum will be developed for teachers after their training is concluded. The students will have access to expertise about the local teaching context from their local facilitators and to foreign language pedagogical knowledge from the on-line course—perhaps the best of both worlds.

By using information technologies to disseminate information, project coordinators can update content

more rapidly than would be possible with textbooks, giving even isolated teachers access to the latest innovations. The on-line course is being piloted in 2001 with the hope that it will serve as a catalyst for other creative solutions to the need for more domain-specific teacher preparation.

Translating Generic Standards into Foreign Language Education Terms

The Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium's Core Standards, a popular template for state teacher standards, consist of ten principles addressing structures of the discipline, the different ways that children learn, instructional strategies, learning environment, communication techniques, planning, assessment, reflection, and collegial relationships. One example of a state standards document based on that template is the Rhode Island Beginning Teacher Standards <www.ed.uri.edu/edfolio>, designed to guide all beginning teachers toward successful classroom practices. State standards specifically for foreign language teachers do not exist. I will review here some of the key foreign language teaching issues as they relate to the Rhode Island standards. To focus the discussion, I will select just four examples from the standards with special pertinence for foreign language learners.

Standard 2. Teachers create learning experiences that reflect an understanding of central concepts, structures, and tools of inquiry of the disciplines they teach. Standard 2.3. Teachers select instructional materials and resources based on their comprehensiveness, accuracy, and usefulness for representing particular ideas and concepts.

Foreign language teachers must learn to select authentic language materials that have not been "dumbed down" for language learners but are aimed at native-speaker audiences. Television commercials, newspaper headlines, train schedules, children's stories, and feature films, among other sources, can be used if the task for students is at the appropriate difficulty level. The materials should support the teacher's efforts to develop understanding of the target culture as well as facility with the language. Novice teachers must learn to develop criteria for selecting materials that are relevant, challenging, and appealing to their specific learners, but not overwhelming. In addition, they must learn the techniques for making those materials accessible to foreign language learners—for instance, highlighting vocabulary, adding visual supports, outlining texts, adding drama, captioning video, and providing prelistening or prereading activities to activate needed prior knowledge.

Standard 4. Teachers create instructional opportunities that reflect a respect for the diversity of learners and an understanding of how students differ in their approaches to

learning. *Standard 4.2. Teachers use their understanding of students (e.g., individual interests, prior learning, cultural experiences) to create connections between the subject matter and student experiences.*

Growing numbers of students in language classes are heritage learners, meaning that they may not be fluent speakers but have personal experiences in the foreign language being taught. Language teachers must learn how to respond to the varied cultural backgrounds of learners, using them to the advantage of all in their classrooms, and meeting their special learning needs. They must not, as I overheard one novice teacher do, proclaim that "Maria doesn't really 'know' Spanish" when other students suggested Maria as a Hispanic resource.

Standard 8. Teachers use effective communication as the vehicle through which students explore, conjecture, discuss, and investigate new ideas. Standard 8.4. Teachers emphasize oral and written communication through the instructional use of discussion, listening and responding to the ideas of others and group interaction.

Communication is, of course, one of the key components of language instruction. The most difficult challenge for novice teachers is to create activities that maximize students' target language use. The added burden for the language teacher is to ensure that interaction between and among learners takes place in the target language. To be successful, teachers must personalize the language tasks to individuals in the class. Students must be given do-able assignments in which they communicate about themselves and their lives in ways that are interesting to themselves and to their peers.

Standard 8.1 Teachers use a variety of communication strategies . . . to engage students in learning.

Classroom activities need to allow even beginning language learners opportunities to express themselves

successfully in response to open-ended prompts. Both divergent and convergent questions should be used with all levels of learners. This is especially challenging to teachers working with beginning learners who have limited language skills. Classroom routines need to be conducted in the target language. The regular house-keeping chores of the class provide valuable opportunities to learn the target language in a recognizable context.

When viewed in their entirety, teaching standards for the foreign language teacher highlight the unique features of the foreign language setting. Assessments of language teachers, such as professional portfolios, must be adjusted to adequately reflect the uniqueness of the foreign language teaching experience. When asked why they are about to become foreign language teachers, students overwhelmingly mention their love of the subject. Colleges, universities, and governing agencies try to impart to beginning teachers the qualities necessary to succeed at sharing this passion with their students. However useful beginning teacher standards are, they still need clarification before they can be readily applied to second language teachers and their language learners. Educators involved in teacher preparation must highlight the importance of discipline-specific goals in all disciplines.

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