



# More Than a Decade of Standards: Integrating “Communication” in Your Language Instruction

BY SANDY CUTSHALL

*EDITOR’S NOTE: In this issue, we begin a series of five articles focused on the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning, or the “5 Cs.” In this first article, we look at Communication—a goal that is “at the heart of language study, whether the communication takes place face-to-face, in writing, or across centuries through the reading of literature,” according to the Standards document. In other articles this year we’ll focus on each of the rest of the goal areas in turn—Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities.*

## Communication

Ask someone why they are studying another language and you will almost always hear that they want to be able to converse with native speakers during travel or in their own home country. Additionally, they may wish to be able to understand what they read and be able to write—particularly via communicative technologies such as e-mail, texting, Twitter, and blogs—using the language. What they probably won’t mention is conjugating verbs or memorizing discrete grammar points.

“Students come to language classes because they want to be able to communicate in the language,” says Laura Terrill, an independent consultant and expert in language education. “If we capture that energy in the first year of language instruction and build on it by designing quality interpersonal activities, we will help them to meet their goal.”

Communication as a goal area of language education was an obvious inclusion in the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning when they were first developed and published in 1996. As June Phillips, project director for the grant to develop the Standards and a member of the original Standards task force, puts it: “Of course,

communication has always been the intent of language education. There was never a time in our field when we said we don’t want to teach people to communicate . . . But,” she adds, “I think we have a much better match now between the intent and how we go about doing it.”

That better match comes out of the 5 Cs—the goal areas of the National Standards—which for the past 15 or so years have helped more and more educators understand what it means to truly facilitate language acquisition and encourage authentic communication in their classrooms.

Phillips, who was also recently co-chair of a federal grant to assess the impact of the National Standards, notes that the recent survey of more than 2,100 individuals reveals that the Standards have had an impact, helping to improve many language educators’ teaching methods, particularly in the goal area of Communication.

“We can see a fuller, deeper understanding of how the three communicative modes play out in the communicative act itself,” she says about the survey, “and a greater knowledge of the best instructional approaches to facilitate those.” Of course, this does not mean that there is not still room for improvement in this area, Phillips notes. [See

sidebar on p. 37 for more about what the Standards survey shows.]

“Prior to the development of the National Standards, I tended to do what textbooks stressed,” admits Terrill. “The Standards initially provided the framework to see how better units could be designed, what was good in textbooks, and what needed to be enhanced. The learning scenarios that were written as part of the National Standards provide good examples of what quality units might look like.”

### Reframing Communication in Language Learning

The National Standards present a very different approach to communication, even compared with the proficiency movement in the 1980s and early 1990s which preceded their development. While teachers have traditionally thought of communicating through the use of the four skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening, the Standards offer a new “Communicative Framework” consisting of three modes which place primary emphasis on the **context** and **purpose** of the communication. These are:



## 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. [INTERPERSONAL MODE]

### Standard 1.2

Students understand and interpret written and spoken language on a variety of topics. [INTERPRETIVE MODE]

### Standard 1.3

Students present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners or readers on a variety of topics. [PRESENTATIONAL MODE]

### Interpersonal

- Characterized by active negotiation of meaning among individuals
- Involving adjustments or clarifications for understanding
- Most obvious in conversation where one person does not know what the responses of the other person will be (i.e., not scripted dialogues)

### Interpretive

- Focused on the appropriate cultural interpretation of meanings that occur in written and spoken form where there is no recourse to the active negotiation of meaning with the writer/speaker
- Including the cultural interpretation of texts, movies, radio and television broadcasts, and speeches
- Not to be confused with the concept of “comprehension”

### Presentational

- Referring to the creation of messages in a manner that facilitates interpretation of members of the other culture where no direct opportunity for the active negotiation of meaning exists
- Examples include the writing of reports and articles or the presentation of speeches

Each mode involves a particular link between language and the underlying culture that is developed gradually over time. The use of these modes is not compatible with a focus solely on grammar or the study of a language separate from its use for communication. The Standards document is clear that, “students do not acquire communicative competence by learning the elements of the language system” [i.e., grammar, isolated vocabulary words] first, and it points out that “an earlier emphasis on the learning of the language system to the exclusion of meaningful interactive activities in the classroom has led to frustration and dissatisfaction for students.”

The Communication goal includes three standards based on the Framework of communicative modes. The first focuses on the Interpersonal mode, the second on the Interpretive mode, and the third on the Presentational mode. (See box above.)

The interconnected nature of the Standards’ goal areas means that even when the focus is on the use of language and the development of communicative competence,

students will need experience in the other goal areas (i.e., the other 4 Cs) in order to have something worth communicating.

Robert Harrell, who has taught German at Pacifica High School in Garden Grove, CA, for 17 years, puts it this way: “If I’m going to communicate, I have to have content. If I’m going to communicate, I have to know something about the culture. If I’m going to communicate, a community is being established in the very act of communication itself. Part of the content I’m going to communicate will make connections to things other than language and then it’s really very easy to make comparisons between the way we communicate in the world language and the way we do in English. I think communication really embraces all of the other things that happen in language learning.”

## What True Communication Looks Like

One major shift from thinking of skills to thinking of communicative modes is that with a focus simply on skills, a teacher may not consider the reason behind a classroom activity or approach. Yet it is in knowing the reason behind it—the purpose for the communication—that many questions regarding implementation are answered.

ACTFL Associate Director of Professional Development Paul Sandrock offers this example: “When a teacher focuses on teaching and practicing writing as a skill and then is trying to decide—‘Should I allow students to do a spell-check or not?’—the question to ask is really, ‘What mode is being used?’ If the writing is Presentational, the expectation from the audience is that it is going to be pretty polished and accurate since the writer will not be there to negotiate meaning and respond to questions. However, if the writer is texting a message to a friend [Interpersonal], the degree of accuracy can be significantly less because if you don’t understand something you are going to text back and ask, ‘What does this mean?’”

Any rules for an assignment or activity therefore, notes Sandrock, depend on the mode—or the purpose—of what you are doing. Those modes should set up how you design a task, how you evaluate that task, and what criteria you use. “Staying in a skill without saying which mode it is in is not useful to the learner or the instructional choices,” says Phillips. “The instructional choices you make differ according to those modes.”

“I think it’s important for any teacher to answer the question, ‘What do I want my students to be able to do with the language?’” says Harrell. “That answer, coupled with what we know about how the brain functions and how languages are acquired, should then direct and inform everything we do.” He continues, “My answer to the question is: To communicate, to know how to continue acquiring the language, and to be able to advocate for their own best interests. I must reject methods that do not contribute to that goal, such as grammar translation.”

Harrell offers an analogy from the world of science: “It’s the difference between dissecting an animal and looking at it as a living creature. I can learn a lot about it when I dissect it, but it’s dead. It’s never going to do anything else. But, if I observe it in its habitat, maybe even interact with it, then I see it as a living organism. It becomes much more fascinating, something you want to spend time with. That’s how I want to present language in my classroom—something that is very much alive and that we really use.”

With this in mind, language learning activities in the classroom need to mirror real-

world, authentic communication as much as possible. For example, when a person reads a newspaper article in real life, what they do in response is not to translate it, answer a list of detailed questions, or complete a fill-in-the-blank exercise. Instead, a communicative activity that would more closely relate to real life would be for the reader to tell someone about what he or she just read, to express his or her own opinion on the topic, or to think about how this is the same or different as a news story he or she read on the same topic yesterday. Teachers should begin by thinking about what they would do in reaction to receiving an e-mail message, reading a wiki, needing to write a letter, or hearing a weather report—and that will give them insight into the kinds of tasks they should be asking their students to do.

“This is what I most often hear that teachers are trying to process as they try to best move to the intent of the Communication standards,” notes Sandrock, who has led many workshops, webinars, and seminars on a Standards-based approach to language learning. “They will say, ‘I used to do this and now I want to try do it differently because it’s getting closer to the real thing, what people really do in real life.’”

With the time limitations and other stresses, more and more language educators are realizing that a focus on actual communication gives them greater “bang for their buck” than grammar drills, worksheets, and memorizing vocabulary lists.

“I simply don’t have enough time with students to waste it on activities and strategies that don’t deliver the way genuine interpersonal communication through comprehension-based teaching does,” says Harrell.

“We have to get students talking because we only have them for the time they have in class,” agrees Sara Buchbaum, a Spanish teacher at Northern Highlands Regional High School in Allendale, NJ. “If it is spent with their heads in a textbook or weighed down with verb conjugations, they’re not using the language. But, the more they are using it, the more effectively they are learning it. So, teachers need to give students a topic that is meaningful for them and get them talking.”

Buchbaum offers the example of a unit she does on relationships with her Spanish V

seniors. The students begin by talking with each other in response to the prompt: “*Es importante que un amigo . . .* [It’s important that a friend . . .]”

“This is Interpersonal,” notes Buchbaum, “so they shouldn’t always know what they will be talking about. It’s spontaneous, discussing with a partner about what is important to them about their friends, using vocabulary they already know. They also use the subjunctive mood—which is something in Spanish that students always find difficult to grasp. That’s because of the old ways of teaching it—I remember it was always ‘the dreaded subjunctive.’ But in these conversations, they have to go into the subjunctive because that type of main clause requires it. So I will remind them of the grammar point, but they are reviewing it without thinking about grammar. Instead, they are thinking about communicating their ideas.”

Within the same unit, Buchbaum will also incorporate activities in the Interpretive mode, such as reading an authentic letter to an advice columnist about relationship problems and having the students share their ideas and interpretations. For the Presentational mode, she says, she might have students write a letter to the same columnist asking for relationship advice, or else have them work in pairs to script and act out for their peers a skit where there is a conflict between friends.

Buchbaum says that although it can be a challenge for students to do this much work staying in the language and communicating—particularly if it involves presenting before their classmates—it is imperative that teachers create a comfortable environment by not embarrassing or overcorrecting students, but instead encouraging them. “The students tend to get nervous, but we work at it every day and that helps keep them from getting too bottled up,” she says.

Harrell says that the Interpersonal mode is really a core element of his teaching, as he considers his entire class to basically be an ongoing conversation with his students in German. “Once you’ve really made that change and your students understand what is happening and they buy into it, class time become a lot more fun for everyone—including the teacher.”

He continues, “It’s really about having a conversation with people you enjoy being with; it makes the day much less stressful in the long run. You aren’t uptight, thinking that, ‘I have to pound the indirect object pronouns into their heads today.’ No, you are going to have a conversation with them and you’re going to use lots of indirect object pronouns and you may point out to them from time to time what is happening. But since they are acquiring the language and not trying to memorize the language, you relax and you know that it takes time.”

Staying in the target language the majority—if not all—of the time is critical to creating an environment where communication can take place, something Harrell says he strives to do. ACTFL’s position statement on target language use (May 2010)—which encourages the 90%-plus goal—suggests many strategies that instructors can use to facilitate comprehension and support meaning-making, including providing comprehensible input that is directed toward communicative goals; making meaning clear through body language, gestures, and visual support; negotiating meaning with students and encouraging negotiation among students; and more.

## Assessing Communication with the Standards

“Assessment plays a critical role in language education: to help students learn to use their new language, to help teachers focus their instruction to maximize its effectiveness, and to provide the public with the evidence it needs to enthusiastically support language programs”

—Paul Sandrock in *The Keys to Assessing Language Performance* (2011)

All educators know that they need to assess their students in some way. But if that assessment is not appropriately targeted to demonstrate what students are actually achieving—an end-of-the-term multiple choice exam to assess interpersonal conversational skills, for example—then no matter what grade they get, what exactly is this telling us?

Rather than tacking on an assessment as an afterthought at the end of a unit, if a teacher uses the National Standards as the beginning point, then clear learning targets

are identified from the outset—in fact they are stated quite explicitly. Because these goals are established and known, all instructional decisions can be derived from them. This method of “backward design” was first described by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe in their book, *Understanding by Design* (1998), and it is an important part of accurately assessing students for their mastery of the communicative modes of the Communication goal area of the National Standards.

“A backward-designed unit will establish clear goals,” agrees Terrill. “Once those goals are in place, it becomes possible to create an integrated performance assessment (IPA) for that unit. While those assessments can take more time, they are truly designed to allow students to show what they know and can do in the language. They replace the assessments that focused on right and wrong answers. Students demonstrate that they understand and can communicate a message. Accuracy is part of the assessment, but understanding and conveying the message is the primary focus.”

A few myths that exist about doing this kind of assessment include: (1) It is too hard; (2) It is only for very experienced teachers who have years in the classroom under their belts; (3) Teachers need to figure out how to do it on their own or else forget about it.

Daisy Laone, a Mandarin Chinese teacher at Betsy Ross Arts Magnet School in New Haven, CT, has exploded all those myths in her very first year teaching in an American classroom. Laone uses the IPA to assess the three communicative modes with her middle school students, following the format set out in *The Keys to Assessing Language Performance*. “I set my goal first and then design the unit from there,” says Laone, “I design activities to help students achieve this goal. I find the format very helpful so I can look into what I can actually use to negotiate meaning.”

Laone, who attended the STARTALK program for Chinese teachers in Glastonbury, CT, for several years as well as other related workshops, has embraced a Standards-based approach at this starting point of her career teaching language in the United States.

[Laone has previous experience teaching English in Taiwan.] She believes that professional development is vital to language edu-

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## What the Survey Shows

In 2008, ACTFL was awarded a three-year federal grant to assess the role that the National Standards have had on the profession. This grant, *A Decade of Foreign Language Standards: Influence, Impact, and Future Directions*, assembled data from a variety of evidence and has resulted in three reports that together show that the Standards have indeed influenced and instigated change in how languages are taught and learned.

One of the findings of the survey based on the responses from state supervisors (20 of the 2,134 individuals surveyed) was that among the goal areas, Communication receives the most attention in terms of teaching emphasis and professional development, with the other 4 Cs being less prominent.

“There is a tendency to embrace Communication and Culture Standards and take these on as a primary mission,” states the survey results document, available on the ACTFL website at [www.actfl.org/standardsgrant](http://www.actfl.org/standardsgrant). “That overlooks the purpose of the Standards’ five-goal-area design, intended to promote greater interdisciplinary work (Connections), more integrated cultural content and the vision of language as having real world communicative use (Communities). Evidence of Standards assessment tends to be in term of Communication only.”

June Phillips, co-chair of the Standards Impact Grant, has overseen the project which included the electronic survey and a review of the professional literature on the Standards, says that it is not that surprising to discover that Communication is the goal area most focused on by teachers. Another survey finding was that the majority of professional development available at the district and state level was focused on Communication (and to a lesser degree, Culture) when compared with the other Cs. In fact, 90% of formal and informal professional development was on Communication, sometimes in combination with one or more of the other Cs.

Despite the fact that survey respondents said that they saw Communication as the “easiest to teach” of all the goal areas, Phillips notes that, “We still have a ways to go in impressing people with the idea of communicative modes and how important they are.”

She says the survey revealed some weaknesses in language educators’ knowledge. “People sometimes said that they were designing their instruction according to Standards, but when looking at their specific responses, we could see they were still thinking in terms of skills. Others thought that teaching vocabulary or grammar were the end goal for teaching the communicative standards.”

The survey shows that many teachers have learned about the modes and know what they are. “But the next level,” she says, “is to really get into understanding how these modes operate in the real world, what their characteristics are, to find the appropriate approaches for teaching them.”

The literature search that was part of the grant project also revealed that more people are writing about those theoretical underpinnings and practices using the three communicative modes.

“It’s a natural progression,” says Phillips. “You’ve got a new paradigm or model (i.e., the National Standards) and then you have to keep exploring it.”



# POP QUIZ:



## How Well Do YOU Know the “Communication” Goal Area of the National Standards?

1. One of the five goals areas of the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning is Communication. In the document's introduction, Communication is described as the organizing principle for language learning in the following way:
  - A. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing
  - B. Memorizing vocabulary and grammatical structures
  - C. Negotiating, creating, and understanding meaning
  - D. Knowing how, when, and why to say what to whom
2. What are the modes of communication as defined in the National Standards?
  - A. Language Functions, Grammatical Structures, and Vocabulary
  - B. Identifying, Describing, Narrating, Persuading, and Hypothesizing
  - C. Interpersonal, Interpretive, and Presentational
  - D. Asking, Telling, Arguing, and Complaining
3. To help students acquire proficiency in communication, an ACTFL position statement recommends:
  - A. Students should learn all the grammar rules first and then speak only in complete sentences
  - B. Teachers and students use the target language as exclusively as possible (90%-plus) at all levels of instruction during instructional time
  - C. Students should only listen and speak in the beginning levels, add writing in the intermediate levels, and read literature in upper levels
  - D. Teachers spend more time correcting students' spoken and written errors
4. Examples of Interpersonal communication would include:
  - A. Texting messages back and forth with a friend
  - B. Participating in an open-ended discussion
  - C. Making a reservation on the phone
  - D. All of the above
5. Examples of the Interpretive mode of communication are:
  - A. Listening, reading, viewing
  - B. Speaking, writing, visually representing
  - C. Both listening and speaking
  - D. Using a bilingual dictionary
6. Interpretive communication is all of the following except:
  - A. Predicting what will happen next in a story
  - B. Using the gist to figure out the meaning of new words
  - C. Translation
  - D. Making inferences based on evidence from an article
7. An example of Presentational communication is:
  - A. Reading a report written by a peer
  - B. Participating in an impromptu debate
  - C. Engaging in a conversation via Skype
  - D. Writing a new ending for a story
8. Students have communicated well if:
  - A. Their errors do not interfere with comprehension of the listener, reader, or viewer
  - B. They paraphrase when they can't think of the exact word
  - C. They ask their partners to rephrase when they don't understand
  - D. All of the above
9. Teaching communicative language functions will develop students' proficiency. An example of a communicative language function is:
  - A. Use of the past tense
  - B. Compare and contrast
  - C. Use of an electronic/online translator
  - D. Translating full sentences
10. An effective model for assessing the modes of communication is:
  - A. Having students memorize dialogues
  - B. Using fill-in-the-blank worksheets
  - C. Integrated Performance Assessment
  - D. Spelling quizzes

Quiz created by ACTFL Associate Director of Professional Development Paul Sandrock

1. D "All the linguistic and social knowledge required for effective human-to-human interaction is encompassed in those 10 words. Formerly, most teaching in foreign language classrooms concentrated on the *how* (grammar) to say *what* (vocabulary). While these components of language are indeed crucial, the current organizing principle for foreign language study is *communication*, which also highlights the
2. C
3. B For more information, see [www.actfl.org/targetlanguage](http://www.actfl.org/targetlanguage).
4. D why, the whom, and the when. So, while grammar and vocabulary are essential tools for communication, it is the acquisition of the ability to communicate in meaningful and appropriate ways with users of other languages that is the ultimate goal of today's foreign language classroom."
5. A
6. C
7. D
8. D
9. B
10. C For more information, see [www.actfl.org/tpa](http://www.actfl.org/tpa).

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cators—both new and experienced—to stay up on the latest methods and to truly explore and understand the standards. “I have other Chinese teachers ask me, ‘Why do you do that?’ And I say, ‘I learned it about this at STARTALK, ACTFL, or somewhere else.’ A lot of times people focus on their own teaching too much and they’re not getting new information or hearing what other people are saying. I think all teachers should be bringing new information into their classrooms.”

How this works in her classroom, for example, would be for a unit on Community, she might start out setting the goals for her students to create their own map, to be able to describe their communities and to be able to ask for and give directions. “When I ask them to make their own map of their mini-community, they can negotiate the meaning to put the places on the map,” she says. “They also have to perform. The students create the map in groups and use interpersonal skills, asking each other questions in the process. They also

interpret the map and must be able to ask and answer unscripted questions about it.”

Laone admits that she finds the Interpretive mode to be the most challenging in her classes due to the complicated nature of Chinese characters. “I find it is most difficult for the students to understand and interpret what they have read. Also, if I have them write a paragraph, the words don’t come out quite right. Sometimes, I will allow them to write in pinyin, not characters, as long as they are able to express what they want to say.” She says that it is a challenge to balance a focus on Communication and to also help students learn to write in characters. “I have to know where to push them and yet not kill their interest in speaking Chinese.”

Because she knows her students overwhelmingly want to learn the language in order to communicate, her next step is to coordinate a pen pal program with a school in Taiwan to build a relationship between her students and native speakers, and also to help them make the connection between writing

characters and interpersonal communication. “They’ll see that if you can only write pinyin, people cannot read what you say and the communication is lost. We don’t write pinyin; we learn to write characters. I hope that will also inspire my students, because they want to communicate with these other students.”

Daisy Laone’s middle schoolers learning Chinese, much like Robert Harrell’s German students or Sara Buchbaum’s Spanish learners and virtually every other language student out there—no matter the age, level, or language—are expressing the same desire to be able to learn and use language for real communication.

“The more learners use the target language in meaningful situations, the more rapidly they achieve competency,” states the Standards document. As language educators, we owe it to our students to provide these opportunities.

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*Sandy Cutshall is Editor of The Language Educator. She is based in Mountain View, California, where she also teaches English as a second language and U.S. citizenship preparation to adults.*

# Resources

## ACTFL Webinar Series – Still Available On-Demand

[www.actfl.org/webinars](http://www.actfl.org/webinars)

### Spring 2011 Series Two: Assessments to Measure and Build Language Performance Paul Sandrock

- *Creating Interpretive Tasks Targeting Proficiency Levels*
- *Designing Presentational Performance Tasks and Their Rubrics*
- *Developing Communication Skills Through Interpersonal Performance Tasks*

### Fall 2011 Series One: Engaging All Learners—Designing Effective Learning and Communicating Results Paula Patrick

- *Designing Lessons to Engage Learners*
- *Differentiating to Support Each Learner*
- *Communicating Students’ Learning*

### Fall 2011 Series Two: Enhancing Literacy—Improving Learners’ Proficiency Laura Terrill

- *Understanding Content: Teaching Strategies for the Interpretive Mode*
- *Creating Content: Teaching Strategies for the Presentational Mode*
- *Discussing Content: Teaching Strategies for the Interpersonal Mode*

## Books Available from the ACTFL Online Store:

- *The Integrated Performance Assessment (IPA) Manual*
- *The Keys to Assessing Language Performance* Paul Sandrock
- *The Keys to the Classroom* Paula Patrick

## Understanding by Design Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe

### Authentic Education

Additional resources supporting UbD  
[www.authenticeducation.org](http://www.authenticeducation.org)

## Teaching Foreign Languages K–12: A Library of Classroom Practices, Annenberg Foundation

A video library illustrating effective instruction and assessment strategies for teaching languages.

[www.learner.org/resources/series185.html](http://www.learner.org/resources/series185.html)

## Comprehensible Input Methods

[www.comprehensibleinput.com](http://www.comprehensibleinput.com)

## A Bibliography of Publications on the National Standards

(compiled as part of the Standards Impact Grant)

[www.actfl.org/standardslibrary](http://www.actfl.org/standardslibrary)