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Language Teachers Align Curricula with Standards: Preliminary Results of a National Survey

Jeff Solomon, Consultant, Center for Applied Linguistics

Standards have been the talk of the language profession ever since a collaboration of organizations, led by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), introduced the national standards for foreign language learning (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996). Like standards in other disciplines, these voluntary language standards are being adapted and modified by many states as well as by many school districts.

A major question that needs to be addressed at this point in the implementation of the standards is this: How much of a national impact have the standards had? Are teachers in schools across the country aware of the standards? If so, have they changed their foreign language curricula because of their knowledge of the standards? As part of a national survey on K-12 foreign language education, the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) designed two survey questions to gather specific information on the impact in U.S. schools of national and state standards. The survey was sent to a stratified random sample of approximately 5% of all public and private elementary and secondary schools in the country (5,733). The response rate was 56%. The responses to these two questions are summarized here to help provide a view of the ongoing effect of standards on foreign language instruction across the country. The results are divided into two sections: one reflecting the responses of 422 elementary schools that teach foreign language and the other reflecting the responses of 1,415 middle, junior high, and high schools.

Elementary School Responses

When asked, *"Are the teachers at your school aware of the national* Standards for Foreign Language Learning (1996) *and/or your state's version of these standards?"*, 37% of the elementary school respondents with foreign language programs at their schools indicated that their teachers were aware of the standards. More public school respondents (45%) indicated teacher awareness than private school respondents (26%). Among public schools, nearly the same percentage of respondents from urban, suburban, and rural settings noted teacher awareness.

There was some striking variation in teacher awareness from one region of the country to another. When respondents were grouped by foreign language conference area, those from the regions of the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (NEC), the Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (CSC), and the Southern Conference on Language Teaching (SCOLT) indicated similar rates of awareness (44%, 43%, and 40%, respectively). Respondents from the regions of the Pacific Northwest Council for Languages (PNCFL) and the Southwest Conference on Language Teaching (SWCOLT) showed a lower awareness (32% and 10%, respectively).

When those who answered *yes* to the first question were asked, *"Has the foreign language curriculum at your school changed because of your awareness of the standards?"*, over half of the elementary school respondents (57%) noted that their schools' foreign language curriculum had changed. Differences between public and private schools were relatively minor (58% and 54%, respectively). Among public schools, however, a considerably higher percentage of urban schools (78%) indicated curriculum change than did rural (53%) or suburban (50%) schools.

The range in variation from one regional foreign language conference area to another was large: 74% for PNCFL, 67% for NEC, 49% for both SCOLT and CSC, and 33% for SWCOLT.

Elementary Schools' Comments on Standards

Respondents were given the opportunity to comment on their response to the question *"Has the foreign language curriculum at your school changed because of your awareness of the standards?"* A total of 22 respondents offered comments.

Language Curriculum Has Not Changed

Of the respondents who provided comments, many had answered that their foreign language curriculum had *not* changed due to an awareness of the standards. Some noted that their curriculum was already based on standards-like principles before standards were developed. These respondents wrote: "It [our curriculum] always was in line with the SOLs [Standards of Learning]"; "We were already doing those things"; and "I feel that we have been striving towards these standards." It is important to note that although these respon-

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dents indicated that their curriculum had not changed because of the standards, they acknowledged that their curriculum meets the objectives of the standards.

Other respondents who said that their curriculum had not changed commented that their foreign language curriculum was currently being revised, there was a lack of time and money for making changes, there was currently no curriculum in place, and their curriculum addressed student needs but was not based on the standards.

Language Curriculum Has Changed

A considerable number of respondents who added comments had answered that their curriculum *had* changed due to awareness of the standards. Among these, respondents reaffirmed the influence of standards on their curriculum in a general manner ("Program has evolved with national and state standards as guides"), mentioned specific aspects of their curriculum that have changed ("Activities focusing on authentic use of the language are emphasized"), and noted current or future changes ("This is the first year for our elementary school program and we are still working on structure and continuity").

A number of those who added comments either had not responded to the question about standards or had responded both affirmatively and negatively. These respondents wrote that their schools had just recently received copies of the standards, were in the process of making changes, had seen changes in some classes but not others, or that they didn't know how to answer the question. Some of these comments suggest that even though changes have not been fully implemented, curricula are being revised to reflect the goals of the standards.

Secondary School Responses

When asked, *"Are the teachers at your school aware of the national* Standards for Foreign Language Learning (1996) *and/or your state's version of these standards?"*, more than six out of ten (62%) of the secondary school respondents with foreign language programs at their schools indicated that their teachers were aware of the standards. A higher percentage of public schools indicated teacher awareness of the standards than did private schools (63% public; 54% private). Among public schools, suburban schools indicated a higher rate of awareness than urban and rural schools (78%, 65%, and 56%, respectively).

Variation was evident when responses were broken down by foreign language conference region: 78% for NEC, 64% for CSC, 56% for SCOLT, 51% for SWCOLT, and 51% for PNCFL. High school respondents indicated higher teacher awareness of the standards (68%) than those from the middle school/junior high school level (57%).

When those respondents who answered *yes* to the first question were asked, *"Has the foreign language curriculum at your school changed because of your awareness of the standards?"*, over half (56%) indicated that their schools' foreign language curriculum had changed. Considerably more respondents from public schools (58%) noted change than those from private schools (44%).

Differences emerged regarding curriculum change in response to awareness of the standards when respondents were grouped by foreign language conference region: 66% for NEC, 60% for PNCFL, 56% for SWCOLT, and 51% for both CSC and SCOLT.

There was little difference between the percentage of high school and junior high/middle school respondents reporting curriculum change due to the standards (56% and 53%, respectively).

Secondary Schools' Comments on Standards

Secondary respondents were given the option to comment on the question, *"Has the foreign language curriculum at your school changed because of your awareness of the standards?"* A total of 110 respondents did so. Among these, considerably more respondents answered that their schools' curriculum *had* changed than that it *had not*.

Language Curriculum Has Changed

Of those who answered that their curriculum *had* changed, many noted that their curriculum was aligned with the foreign language standards or that it embodied standards-like principles prior to the development of the actual standards. A large number of these commented on specific features that had changed in their schools' foreign language curriculum due to an awareness of the standards. Some noted that their curriculum had a greater focus on proficiency ("We have become more proficiency oriented," "Indiana is adopting proficiency-based instructional guidelines"), others mentioned an increased emphasis on assessment ("assessment in four skill areas," "we have been emphasizing . . . authentic assessment"), while others wrote that either new instructional levels or requirements had been added to their curriculum. In some cases, respondents commented on two specific areas of change, such as assessment and proficiency. Other respondents citing specific changes to their curriculum mentioned integrating culture into classroom projects, making the curriculum more activity-based, adding an aural/oral emphasis, teaching "structure through culture," and creating a new teacher position.

A considerable number of respondents noted that their foreign language curriculum was undergoing change or revision. These are representative comments: "We are currently involved in a system-wide curriculum revision so that we may meet standards"; "Curriculum update and implementation 1995-96"; "Curriculum committee currently rewriting objectives"; "In the process"; and "We all have the national and state standards and are working toward them."

Other comments that did not readily fit into a category range from, "I'd like to know more about standards," to "It is one of the main objectives of the school to improve the foreign language program this year," to "I am aware of the standards but the other [non-foreign language] teachers are not."

Some respondents wrote that they were just becoming aware of the standards or that the standards had just been introduced to their schools. Respondents noted: "These standards were just introduced this year to our school (1996)"; "Teachers are just becoming educated on standards/are experimenting (some)"; "We have just received them and hope to implement some changes"; and "We are just becoming aware of the national standards and are at the beginning stage of implementing them in and throughout our program."

According to a small number of other respondents, teachers and administrators were actively involved in developing standards at the district or state level. One respondent wrote, "Our assistant principal, a former language teacher, served on state standards committee," while another respondent commented, "Several of us are involved in state standards task force, which will make its way down to district curriculum writing within next year or two."

Finally, a few respondents stated that they were aware of the standards but their schools or districts lacked the funds and professional development activities to implement them. These respondents

stated: "Knowing the best procedures and techniques does not mean there is training, conferences, or money for implementation" and "We know what we should be doing and what we need to do—however, with no elementary/middle school program and no funds—[it is] virtually impossible."

What is perhaps most striking about the comments of respondents who answered that their language curriculum had changed is the extent to which an awareness of the standards has led to curriculum change even for those respondents who reveal that they have just become aware of the standards or are in the beginning stages of curriculum revision. For respondents who cited a lack of money or professional development opportunities as obstacles to implementing standards, it is noteworthy that in the face of such problems they acknowledged that an awareness of the standards had led to changes in their foreign language curriculum.

Language Curriculum Has Not Changed

Among those who answered that their curriculum had *not* been influenced by standards, a considerable number commented that their foreign language curriculum met standards-like goals prior to the actual development of standards. Representative comments include these: "We were already working toward the goals established in the standards"; "We were pretty much on target as it was"; "Our requirements were more stringent than national standards and still are"; "We were beyond the standards because we developed our own curriculum 3 years ago"; and "We have followed consistently what is now a part of the written standards."

It is interesting that respondents in both groups (i.e., those who answered that their curriculum *had* changed in response to the standards and those who answered that their curriculum had *not* changed) cited the same reason for their response: that their foreign language curriculum included standards-like goals before the advent of standards. It appears, then, that respondents who cited this reason answered *yes* or *no* based on their interpretation of the question. Perhaps those who answered *yes* acknowledged that standards continue to reinforce what their curriculum already included, while those who answered *no* asserted that their curriculum embodied standards-like principles independent of the actual standards. Regardless of respondents' motivations for answering *yes* or *no*, however, it is most significant that those who answered *no* stated that their curriculum is nonetheless aligned with the foreign language standards. This leads one to wonder how many other respondents who answered *no* but did not provide comments do in fact have a curriculum that is aligned with standards, even if that curriculum was developed before the standards.

According to another group of respondents who answered *no* to the question, changes will occur in their foreign language curriculum to ensure alignment with the standards. Respondents noted, "We have a goal to study the national and state standards and align them with our own"; "We keep up to date, and teachers will change because of last year's publication of standards"; and "We will work on a county-wide foreign language curriculum in the near future." This category of responses is significant, because when the number of those whose curriculum was already aligned with standards are combined with those who are planning to align their curriculum with standards, the total number of respondents is large.

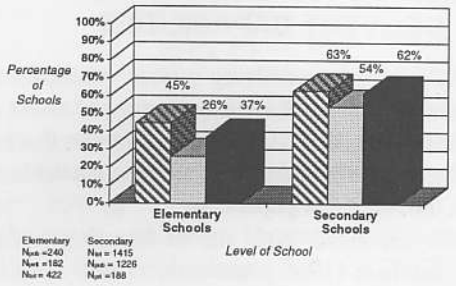
Conclusion

Overall, about half of the schools teaching foreign languages said that their teachers were aware of national or state language standards. As expected, teachers in secondary schools were more aware of the standards than elementary school teachers, perhaps because of more involvement in professional development. It is promising to see that over half of the schools that said their teachers were aware of the standards noted that their schools' foreign language curriculum had changed due to this awareness. Although some schools suggested that their curriculum was already reflecting the principles of the standards, many teachers offered anecdotal evidence of how changes will occur in their curriculum to ensure alignment with the standards' five goals of communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and community.

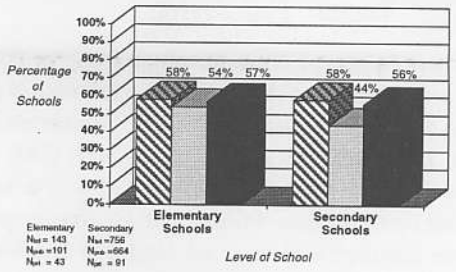
Reference

National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project. (1996). *Standards for foreign language learning: Preparing for the 21st century.* Lawrence, KS: Allen.

Elementary and Secondary Schools with Foreign Language Programs that are Aware of the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning and/or their State's Version of the Standards (1997)



Elementary and Secondary Schools with Foreign Language Programs Reporting that their Foreign Language Curriculum has Changed Due to Awareness of the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning and/or their State's Version of the Standards (1997)



The results of the complete 1997 K-12 Foreign Language Survey, replicating CAL's 1987 survey, will provide data on enrollment trends; languages and programs offered; curricula; assessment practices; teaching methodologies; teacher qualifications and training; and major issues facing the field. To receive a summary of the results, available in January 1998, send your name and address to Lucinda Branaman or Nancy Rhodes, Center for Applied Linguistics, 1118 22nd St. NW, Washington, DC 20037-1214. Tel.: (202) 429-9292. Fax: (202) 659-5641. E-mail: survey@cal.org