

An ACTFL Issues Paper

Response to the Welles and James Article: ACTFL Newsletter, Volume XI, No. 1

Dale L. Lange, Professor Emeritus, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

The discussions begun on the *National Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (1996) are extremely helpful in sorting out their meaning and implications for use in our education systems. The articles of James and Welles provide some perspectives that ask important questions, state important concerns, indicate problems, and provide interesting advice. My response to these two issue papers has the following purposes: 1) to characterize them; 2) to examine their major issues; 3) to bring together their several suggestions as agenda for the further implementation of the Standards; and, 4) to discuss the future development of the Standards.

The contrast between the two papers is immediate and clear. Welles projects an outlook that is both protective of the role of higher education in language learning and cautious of K-12 Standards. She seems preoccupied with the acceptance and dissemination of the Standards in post-secondary education ("How are faculty members in higher education finding out about the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning?*", 7) as she ruminates about the lack of grammar, the little attention to the reading of literature, and a curriculum, that she suggests, limits expectations. Yet, Welles recognizes the importance of a long sequence of learning and the necessity for articulation between secondary and postsecondary education, albeit within the confines of a higher education agenda—and, she indicates little acknowledgement that at least 40 percent of students do not pursue collegiate education and have other agenda that could include competence in a foreign language.

The James' article demonstrates a frankness toward the K-12 Standards (or the coming language-based "K-16" Standards) as a major influence in the reform of language learning in postsecondary education. While arguing that some of the content of the Standards already exists in postsecondary education (Culture: cultural studies, area studies; Connections: language across the curriculum, interdisciplinary studies; Communication: communicative language teaching), James exhorts her postsecondary colleagues to expand upon these, as well as to accept the remainder of the Standards content (Comparisons, and Communities). The changes in

instruction these contents will bring could effect the long-needed reform of language programs at this level. The Standards could help rebuild language programs related to the development of learner competence, articulate with that development, and build curriculum, instruction, and assessment on an integration of the five content areas and of language functions (interpersonal, interpretive, presentational).

Representing the Modern Language Association (MLA), Welles provides a traditional response to change in the orientation of language learning, as well as to a greater understanding of the process of language learning and development. She singles out reading, the reading of literature as content, and grammar as not receiving specific enough attention in the Standards. Reading, however, is specifically placed within the goal area of Communication (Standard 1.2), and is then integrated with four other goal areas, indicating that reading is a tool (*Standards* 1996; 28, 33, 39-40) for accessing a variety of texts and content, including literature. By this placement and integration, the framers of the Standards are indicating that reading is not a skill by itself alone, nor is its sole content literature. Reading is connected to other skills and combined with other contents for purposes of learning and problem solving. From a developmental perspective in either first-language reading (Samuels 1987) or in that of a second language (Bernhardt 1991), background knowledge (including text features and cultural knowledge) are crucial to the understanding of any text. Without broad cultural and textual experience, as well as the proper level of cognitive maturity, attitude, and attention or focus, the comprehension of literary texts suffers: An exclusive direction toward reading denies the diversity of students, student interests, and their learning needs in today's schools, not to mention the necessity for cognitive knowledge and experience as requisite conditions for functioning in and with another language.

While Welles recognizes that reading occupies a place in the Standards, she is neither content with its placement, integration, or combination, nor that its content is broader than a literary one. This attitude is consistent with a traditional perspective on language learning in

postsecondary education over the past hundred years. An examination of the recommendations of the MLA Committee of Twelve (Modern Language Association 1898), one volume of the *Modern Foreign Language Study*, known as the Coleman Report (Coleman 1929), and Welles' statements demonstrate a consistency of purpose: That objective is targeted toward an almost exclusive orientation for reading and the reading of literature as a prerequisite to study of foreign languages in postsecondary education. That tradition and that orientation pose problems. For example, we still deal with the aftereffects of Coleman's recommended two-year program targeted specifically toward reading in the lack of extended school programs (K-12, 7-12, and even 9-12) that deal with the development of foreign language competence as a system of learning. But in the current Standards context, the progress indicators for reading under the Communication Standard in Grades 4, 8, and 12, and their discussion, confirm the importance of a developmental perspective for reading that includes literature, when and where appropriate. The Standards recognize a broader purpose for language than the tradition of postsecondary education.

As for grammar, Welles' perspective appears traditional as well. In examining several models of language learning for communication (Lange 1987), grammar is noted as a key element of them all. In the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* (Byrnes et al. 1986), the central elements of proficiency are fluency, grammar, pronunciation, sociolinguistic competence, the particular communication task, and vocabulary. In both the models and the *Proficiency Guidelines*, grammar is linked to the other elements, as the other elements are linked to grammar. Grammar is not to be learned alone; it has a communicative purpose which is to obtain and provide information (tell and receive stories, if you will) that expand our perspectives and knowledge about our world, others, and ourselves. Additionally, these same models and current teaching practices reflect a position on the acquisition of language, including grammar, that is developmental. In this regard, I specifically single out Lee and VanPatten (1995) as demonstrating the importance of grammar in classroom language acquisition through processes of structured and meaningful input and meaning-bearing output that are developmental in nature. In this vision, grammar has functionality in all modes of communication. The position of Welles, that of an intellectualized grammar, leads learners to an inability to communicate in the interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational modes of the Standards.

The James article contrasts that of Welles with a sense of acceptance of the Standards and an urgency of purpose. In general, the article provides a positive message. Working with the Standards is something that postsecondary faculty can do if they recognize the Standards and work with them. Since the Standards are not a curriculum, but a destination with enormous flexibility, James argues that they provide opportunities to create and develop new curricula at the collegiate level. However, faculty at this level must act on these opportunities. In a sense, James is wagering with this faculty ("Better by far

to consider why the Standards have struck such a responsive chord among our colleagues..." 12). She suggests that the faculty take the opening provided by Standards to solve some of the crucial problems at this level (placement, articulation, assessment, and excessive concentration on grammar), as well as to renew instructional practice (see the last paragraph on page 12 as examples of such renewal).

There is also urgency in James' language. According to her perspective, students have been positioned for years in a bottom-up/top-down struggle between K-12 and postsecondary education levels as to which level determines the curriculum. In the present context of Standards development, she argues that the bottom-up direction has more potential for driving foreign language education to meaningful reform than the bottom-down one. In this context, James indicates postsecondary education can no longer ignore reality. It cannot continue to demonstrate its arrogance. The long-term result of ignoring students who have been prepared with Standards will be a serious diminishment of student numbers in higher education foreign language courses. That diminishment will come because the content and instruction of such courses will be directly antithetical to students' preparation, knowledge, experience, and capabilities as developed through Standards. Thus, urgency arrives to avoid the argument over which level wins control of the curriculum and to focus attention on the ultimate prize, student learning. I think James would argue that "such time has arrived."

The perspectives, attitudes, and differing opinions of both writers are to be respected, thoughtfully considered, and sorted out for action by the profession. Yet, the contrasts of major perspectives are not the only ideas that James and Welles bring to our attention. Within their comments, they also bring major agenda to our attention that can serve the cause of the Standards. In my interpretation of their articles, Welles and James argue for the following items for action to which I have added my own perspective:

- *Dissemination of the Standards and discussion of implications for postsecondary language programs (Welles).* There is no single way in which this task can be accomplished. Many devices could be used: 1) conference programs of the MLA and ACTFL, as well as through those of the language specific organizations specifically targeted for the postsecondary professoriate; 2) publications of these same organizations; 3) symposia; and 4) workshops. In each of these strategies, collaboration of precollegiate and postsecondary faculty would be required and an action plan for the recognition and implementation of the Standards throughout K-16 would be an outcome. Such discussions could also benefit from the participation of parents.
- *Articulation of Programs (for continuous language learning, K-16 - Welles and James).* Through cooperative efforts of ACTFL, MLA, the language specific organizations, regional conferences, state organizations, and state language coordinators, the many problems

of articulation could be addressed (expectations, curriculum, instruction, materials, and use of technology) between and among educational levels (elementary, middle school, high school, postsecondary). It is not just the high school-postsecondary articulation problem that is the only concern.

- *Examination of the Assessments (Welles and James)*: The same organizations mentioned above in articulation of programs could focus on the range of assessments needed to carry out the Standards. That range includes both traditional means, such as quizzes, essays, and objective measures, as well as emerging assessment strategies, such as portfolios, exhibitions, authentic tasks, and demonstrations. These organizations could provide ongoing guidance in the development and use of such assessments within the framework of their programs (conferences, workshops, symposia, and publications) and in relationship to the Standards themselves. The National Language Resource Centers, some of which are researching assessments, might be useful in addressing this agenda. The work of Wiggins (1998) on assessment could be extremely helpful in this task.
- *Placement from One Level to Another (Welles and James)*: Another task of study, discussion, and action are the assessments for placement and the policy by which placement occurs for those students who move from one educational level to another. The most crucial point is that between high school and college where potentially the difficulties lie. In general, the placement examinations that are used need serious attention because they focus almost entirely on the easiest element to test, grammar, thereby ignoring students' ability to communicate and understand.

It is highly possible that the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (1996) will have enormous impact on foreign language learning in the near future as their implementation takes place. Yet, the framers of the Standards and those who implement the Standards must continually interact on them in order that the Standards provide the world class direction and outcomes that we all want for students. It may be that even now some reconceptualization is required. In a study reported on at the 1997 ACTFL Meeting (Lange 1999), I examined those Standards that had bearing on Culture (Culture, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities) using Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of cognitive educational outcomes and Krathwohl's (1964) taxonomy of affective educational outcomes. The examination took place mainly at the level of the progress indicators for the National Standards and for the thirty-three states that had issued standards documents in 1997. The results of the examination of progress indicators for grades 4, 8 and 12 show activities that concentrate mostly on the lowest two levels of these taxonomies (Cognitive: Knowledge and Comprehension; Affective: Receive and Respond). However, the original intent of the Standards was to see students functioning with more complicated cognitive (Application, Analysis, Synthesis, Evaluation) and affective (Value, Organize One's Values, and Be Characterized by One's Values)

activities. While I have only examined the Standards from the perspectives mentioned, this examination does reveal that, like the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines*, persistent attention is important to give the Standards the world-class quality attributes they need to direct student learning.

The discussion brought about by the James and Welles issue papers challenges us to clarify our personal and collective positions on the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (1996) as we act on our best intentions for student learning outcomes. The direction and quality of those intentions have been the subject of these two papers and this response. Let the dialogue continue!

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