Implementing the National Standards in First-Year Spanish
Sheri Spaine Long
University of Alabama at Birmingham

Abstract: The implementation of the Standards for Foreign Language Learning in introductory Spanish language programs in higher education is beneficial for internal and external reasons. Standards-based instructional materials are a needed support mechanism to achieve truly Standards-driven learning. Discussion about how to identify characteristics, samples and examples of Standards-focused materials for introductory Spanish in higher education is presented to facilitate and advocate for thorough implementation of the National Standards.

Key Words: implementing National Standards, instructional materials, higher education, introductory Spanish, textbooks, teaching culture

Introduction

It is no secret that introductory Spanish programs in higher education frequently lag behind secondary programs in the systematic implementation of the Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century (SFLL). Why? There are many reasons. Some of these reasons are political, and others are practical. On one hand, the type of preparation that instructors receive to teach introductory Spanish at colleges and universities is frequently not connected to the profession at large. It is a localized, pedagogical training that is pegged to the particular institutional needs of a specific Spanish program and is often tailored explicitly to providing support for a number of teaching assistants, adjunct or part-time instructors and/or full-time faculty to teach Spanish on the introductory level. This specialized training rarely furnishes a broad overview of the profession in which SFLL would be implicit. Too often, the five goal areas of the SFLL (Communication, Cultures, Comparisons, Connections and Communities, known as the “5 Cs”) are not included in discussions of Spanish pedagogy in higher education. The SFLL: Executive Summary is available to download at the web site of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) for a quick review of the goal areas and the specific standards.

Standards in Higher Education

Consider the question: Why teach to the SFLL in higher education in the first place? There are compelling reasons—both internal and external to the foreign language profession—to provide Standards-based Spanish programs in higher education.

External Motivations

• Standards-based learning is the professionally accepted norm.
• Standards-based instruction promotes interdependency (K–16+), to the betterment of language learning in the U.S.
• Standards-based learning helps provide programmatic justifications to accrediting agencies and administrators.
• Standards-based instruction helps programs compete for external funding.
Internal Motivations

- Standards-based learning offers variety, balance and flexibility and addresses our diverse student population(s).
- Standards-based learning can be fully embraced and implemented by those at any academic rank and by those who do not profess a specialization in pedagogy or second language acquisition.
- Standards-based instruction offers checks and balances in the teaching and learning process to help instructors not focus on just one skill, approach, function or goal area.
- Standards-based instruction allows Spanish faculty to form part of a mainstream, internal dialog in the profession by articulating common goals.

Standards in Instructional Materials

A Standards-based philosophy in higher education has taken root slowly due to the dearth of textbook programs and other instructional materials that are philosophically Standards-driven. However, there are abundant slightly revamped programs and materials that highlight some aspects of a SFL approach. With all of these materials claiming to be Standards-based, how does an instructor distinguish between materials that provide only a partial primer in the Standards and materials that fully embrace the SFL?

To implement the Standards best, one must use instructional materials that are philosophically rooted in the SFL and tangibly display the “5 Cs” on the level of discourse, content, approach, tasks and activities. Consider these questions: How do the Standards form part of an introductory Spanish program? What evidence does one look for in instructional materials that clearly demonstrates the underpinnings of the SFL? Sample characteristics of Standards-based materials for introductory-level Spanish will follow.

First of all, the SFL goal areas should be visibly present in introductory Spanish materials in programs where instructors have limited or little experience with the SFL. The presence of the “5 Cs” in the instructor’s materials helps orient and reinforce the fundamental concepts. The first three goal areas (Communication, Cultures, and Comparisons) are the easiest for Spanish instructors to embrace because they historically occur in most mainstream Spanish classes with regularity. E. Spinelli’s presidential address during this AATSP convention suggested that there are two goal areas that are harder to put into practice in language programs: Connections and Communities. In fact, these, along with providing opportunities for beginning language students to communicate in the presentational mode, are the most challenging areas to address in introductory Spanish classes. By category, below are sample elements to look for in instructional materials to ensure balanced coverage of all “5 Cs” and the three communicative modes.

Communication

These activities are easy to spot in most introductory materials because they promote communication in Spanish. They may take the form of activities to organize conversational exchange in small groups, to write an e-mail message to a classmate or to watch a video segment and interpret meaning. According to the SFL, communication occurs in these modes: Interpretative, Interpersonal and Presentational. Some examples of interpretative activities might include listening to a CD segment and identifying information that corresponds to the content, viewing a video or DVD clip and selecting elements that are present in the production, and reading a cultural passage or cartoon with follow-up activities. Common examples of activities that promote interpersonal communication are class survey activities where students ask and respond to questions, conversational activities in pairs, and two-way or multi-directional discourse in a Spanish chat room for introductory students. Interpretative and interpersonal activities are found abundantly in most introductory programs.

An area where some instructional materials need additional development to be Standards-
driven is in providing a variety of presentation communication opportunities for learners. Presentation is a real-world skill that is often neglected in introductory Spanish programs. In the presentational mode, communication is unidirectional. Students may communicate live or via a web site, poster, video, etc. True Standards-based materials will provide presentational opportunities written into many instructional direction lines and specific activities built into the daily classroom routine. Some examples include opportunities for students to report assigned Internet research results, data analysis, summaries, opinions, results of fact-findings or interviews in the form of a brief, summarized presentation to class members, instructor, designated small group or other appropriate audience. At this point, the interpersonal mode can enter into dialogue with the presentational mode via question and answer sessions, class discussion of the presentations, and the like.

Cultures

Cultural content and activities are clearly identifiable in instructional materials. The SFLL philosophy reflects diversity of cultural content and will include multiple manifestations of the Spanish-speaking culture(s). Cultures reflect the width and breadth of the Spanish-speaking world, both inside and outside the U.S., e.g., the Garífuna people of Central America, Chinese immigration to Peru, indigenous languages and customs in Mexico, Afro-Caribbean dance, Spanish language in Africa, art and architecture of the Guggenheim Museum (Bilbao, Spain), U.S. Latinos in the New South, etc. A broad variety of cultural examples in many forms should be embedded in Standards-based instructional materials, e.g., photos, readings, data, information, music, art, literature, popular culture, etc. Both daily-life culture and high culture will be present in Standards-based materials.

Comparisons

Language and cultural comparisons should be present in Standards-based instructional materials. Typical examples of comparisons include contrasting L1 to L2 in grammar presentations and practice, comparing how borrowed lexical items move from one language to another, and encouraging students to make cultural comparisons regarding styles of meeting and greeting in Spanish-speaking culture(s) and the culture with which they are most familiar. Comparisons are second nature for most language instructors because they know and compare at least two cultures regularly. However, instructional materials have not always taken full advantage of the multicultural nature of foreign-language learning with explicit comparative activities and explanations featured in instructional materials; instead, they have often left instructors to generate their own favorite comparative examples. Strong Standards-based materials will provide a variety of cultural and language comparisons.

Connections

Making relevant connections between the Spanish classroom, other disciplines, careers, and acquiring information beyond “the study of the Spanish language for language’s sake” is important in introductory Spanish in higher education. The stronger the extra-disciplinary connections are for the student, the more likely it is that the student will continue Spanish study beyond the introductory level. One example of a connections activity is to have the student locate and research in the office of career services on his or her campus for bilingual (Spanish - English) jobs and careers. The student must see what combined skills are necessary to attain bilingual positions. In introductory Spanish materials, basic vignettes of bilinguals in a variety of disciplines (tourism, philanthropy, sports, science, health, business, art, literature, technology, etc.) are ways in which students see individuals using Spanish in a variety of fields and can make this connection. Connecting students via the Internet to help them explore Spanish-speaking information sources like
the Latino media in the U.S. is a way to bridge cultures and make connections at the introductory level.

Communities

Offering opportunities for introductory Spanish students to participate in Spanish-speaking communities at home and around the world is challenging. Sample activities where students use technology to have direct contact with native Spanish speakers in the target language include posting a simple question in a chat room, participating in a brief web survey, or researching authentic travel destinations and itineraries abroad. Another example is getting students to research and volunteer in places where limited-English speakers from Spanish-speaking backgrounds need basic help filling out forms, or to help babysitting Spanish-speaking children at a local multicultural center. A popular example is taking classes with natives who offer instruction in Latin dance, in which some of the discourse will be in Spanish. All of these experiences get students on the path to lifelong learning (Standard 5.2) and offer first-hand contact with Spanish-speaking communities either face-to-face or virtually.

Conclusion

There are valid reasons to advocate for and promote Standards-driven introductory Spanish language learning and programs in higher education. Both external and internal factors serve as an incentive to adopting this profession-wide approach. Truly Standards-based introductory instructional materials can be used to facilitate implementation and promote the philosophy and framework of the National Standards to the benefit of Spanish programs and individual instructors in language departments in colleges and universities across the U.S.

NOTE

1 All of the specific examples from instructional materials used at the AATSP convention were from Nexos. Introductory Spanish.

WORKS CITED


