CHAPTER 8

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Culture, the Driving Force

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INTRODUCTION

By doing the video and the research we did find out about different cultures and how and why people immigrated, the culture down there that causes them to immigrate. We learned what their connection with us was through immigration, and why they wanted to come here. And we also learned the similarities and differences between the two cultures. —9th grade, Spanish III student, Frederick, MD. (Schwartz & Kavanaugh, 1997, p. 125)

The insights expressed by the student quoted above did not arise, never would have arisen, from studying culture in the capsule form or as boxed in notes in a textbook. The perspectives gained by this student after a three-week video-based unit on Guatemalan immigration demonstrate a
thoughtfulness and a reflectiveness that goes deeper than adolescent language reveals. The comments were certainly rewarding to the collaborators, a university professor and a high school teacher, who had undertaken the challenge to develop a unit premised on the cultural framework proposed in the foreign language standards (National Standards, 1996). That framework emphasizes the interactions between products and practices of cultures with the perspectives that render cultures distinct.

The Minnesota Culture Conferences were taking place during the time that the Standards Task Force was gathering information from the research and comments from the profession. It is not accidental that the framework in the National Standards document (1996) resonates with similar interdisciplinary thinking, especially from the social sciences, and intercultural connections, for those represent the direction and central focus that place culture learning at the forefront of language instruction.

**AN EVOLUTION TOWARD STANDARDS**

Historically, culture has played a number of roles in second language classrooms, but it has never dominated in terms of methodology or approach. It has been appended to the language learning modalities, as in four skills and culture. It has even been pulled in slightly more to the center referred to by some as a fifth skill. At the upper division in colleges and universities, a culture or civilization course has usually been a part of the sequence for majors/minors; frequently, it has been geared to coverage of history and fine arts as a background necessary for courses in literature. In terms of content, an emphasis on either the patterns of life or civilization have been reflected through designations such as little c and big C culture. The inadequacy of this division meant that instruction in little c topics often became trivialized or over generalized in ways that perpetuated stereotypes, while the big C remained on the level of facts, such as names, places, and historical periods. Neither a cultural dichotomy nor culture as an aside had ever been the intent of those who spoke most eloquently for culture as an essential component of second language learning. Brooks (1968) argued for an anthropological orientation that focused on the interaction of social patterns with the individual, but his vision of overlapping spheres of formal and deep culture gave way to the temptation of classroom practice to categorize the pieces and lose the tableau. Allen’s (1985) excellent review of the many models for teaching culture in classrooms captures the theoretical premises of several models and the solid analysis that formed the basis for instructional materials. Unfortunately, over the years, little of this information seems to have filtered to the level of classroom practice or materials.

Will the influence of the national standards and the commitment to culture contained therein change this situation? That remains unknown, but we do have an opportunity to once more impart the message of Hall (1973) that culture is communication (p. 97) and Fantini’s (1997) addendum that communication is culture. (p. 3). The Standards Task Force intended from the beginning of the project to expand the cultural experiences in which learners would engage, but it was the completed publication and subsequent classroom applications that demonstrated that culture had indeed become the driving force of the standards. Culture ended up permeating every goal area. As noted by Lange (Lange & Wiczocek, 1997), when commenting upon a series of classroom case studies, “the focus of the projects is always on the interaction of the learner with some aspect of culture. I would say that the projects stay away from the dichotomy of large C and small c culture. I think that is a plus because it’s really culture that is important and the broad array of elements which that includes . . . all the projects are working toward the same basic goal, which is culture undivided into traditional categories of large and small” (p. 245). The standards, then, do not propose anything radically new in terms of culture; they do attempt to refocus teachers’ attention upon culture as the core so that it may become the central outcome of student learning, long espoused but seldom achieved.

**THE CULTURAL FRAMEWORK IN THE STANDARDS**

The dominant role of culture in the standards can be seen by the multiple ways in which it is incorporated in sections of the document; two of these strands are explicit and one is implicit: Culture is one of the Five Cs along with Communication, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. The Culture goal area generates two standards, but a culture standard is also one of the Comparisons that learners are encouraged to make. Culture as content is identified as part of the curricular weave that supports learning in all the goal areas (National Standards, p. 29). Furthermore, as classroom applications of standards are being developed, it becomes apparent that culture forms the context in which all the other goal areas play out. What is communication in a second language if it does not reflect in language and in social behaviors the culture in which discourse occurs? As interdisciplinary connections are forged, the perspectives of the target cultures are conveyed through the focus of the disciplines. Using language in communities at home and abroad requires attention to and further learning about the society of action. In every way, culture becomes integrated with and integral to language learning.
CULTURE AS GOAL AREA AND STANDARDS

Visually the goals are portrayed as interlocking circles to illustrate their interdependence and an absence of hierarchical relationship (see Figure 1). Specific standards are derived for each goal area, so that instruction and assessment can focus on one area even as the dynamic of learning tasks and of the learning environment encourages various elements to be integrated.

The full rubric for the Culture Goal states that students "will gain knowledge and understandings of other cultures." The two standards for Culture are:

- Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the cultures studied;
- Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the cultures studied.

Understanding perspectives, that is the meanings, attitudes, values, and ideas of cultures studied, is the ultimate goal for learners of the world's languages. Perspectives are the common thread in the two standards that fashion the culture goal. The profession recognizes that for both pragmatic and humanistic reasons the standards needed to feature prominently the study of many diverse cultures. Many members of the business and government community who support the study of other languages and cultures do so out of a desire for students to become citizens who can live and work in a world with fewer cultural misunderstandings. Likewise in the academic community, those who place priority on culture for humanistic, aesthetic, or personal development reasons find the framework to be an effective organizer. At the same time, the task force had to attend to the philosophical and political turmoil currently surrounding cross-cultural issues in U.S. education. Strident voices from various educational watchdog groups stood ready to attack any intrusion of values (at least those of others) into the curriculum. The decision was taken to set standards that challenged students to understand the perspectives that generated practices and products and the transmutation the latter has on the former. This decision should result in in-depth and meaningful study without necessarily promoting the endorsement or assimilation of those values by students. (Figure 2 illustrates the interaction among perspectives, practices, and products.)

In reality, an observation of a cultural phenomenon usually merges all three elements of the triangle. For classroom purposes, it is thought that practices and products are distinctive enough to enable a curricular focus and analytical observations by students of all ages. Yet, in order to understand the whole, students and teachers are encouraged to think triangul arly and let the angles interact. As the standards become more widespread in practice, it will be important to monitor whether these divisions create the categorizations common in the past or whether the gestalt holds.

The standards framework avoids adopting any one model for culture learning to the exclusion of others. The construct behind the labels does

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Figure 8.1. The five c's of foreign language education (National Standards, 1996, p. 28).

Figure 8.2. Interaction among perspectives, practices, and products (National Standards, 1996, p. 43).
seem to be compatible with a great many contemporary theories or models, most of which share a basis in anthropology or social sciences. For example, Fantini and Fantini (1997) in their work in cross-cultural training propose a model that has students look at artifacts (things people make), sociofacts (how people come together and for what purpose), and mentsifacts (what people think or believe). At one time, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (1983) attempted to include culture guidelines with its proficiency guidelines, but soon acknowledged that culture did not fit the hierarchical model of the skills. Allen (1985) and Lafayette (1988) both provide extensive illustration of how the profession has sought to accommodate the learning of culture into various models that often mixed information about the culture with approaches to student learning. The standards task force built upon extant research and instructional models, but looked at culture (and the other goal areas) through the prism of student performances. Now that the Minnesota Culture Conferences have gathered together a number of models and processes based upon current research, it will be informative to align those with the standards framework to assess the degrees of compatibility.

THE INTERACTION OF PERSPECTIVES, PRODUCTS, AND PRACTICES

For many years, teachers have used artifacts from target cultures so that students might see, touch, or experiment with a product. Increased availability of video and authentic text permits learners to observe behaviors and, more important, to investigate whether conclusions drawn from their observations are idiosyncratic or generalizable to a culture.

An example of perspectives, practices, and products drawn from the standards document illustrates the interaction:

... in some Asian cultures members are positioned (a perspective) on a hierarchical scale based on age, social status, education, or similar variables. In those cultures, the exchange of business cards (a product) that provides key information is a helpful practice. Because these cards facilitate social interaction and are treated with respect in those cultures, one should not scribble another name or telephone number on the business card (taboo practice). The information on the card also affects the nonverbal behavior (practice) of those involved in the communicative interaction, as well as the choice of linguistic forms (products) that indicate status. (National Standards, 1996, p. 46)

Under this paradigm, students of language/culture acquire insights from a larger context, which allow them to see the complexity inherent in all peoples. The hope is that they realize few absolutes exist, that they must often suspend judgments and seek expanded observations. To accomplish this hope, teachers, textbook writers, seminar leaders on cultural topics are urged to explore the construct to determine its effectiveness. As one peruses the literature, it is not unusual to see a match with the standards framework even though the author had not so intended. Nostrand (1996) describes how a film (product), based upon a piece of literature (product), was used in a beginning college class to develop student awareness of some of the values held in French culture (perspectives). The film/literary text was Marcel Pagnol’s *Le château de ma mère* which students watched with subtitles. Nostrand describes scenes from the film that permitted students to observe products and practices as they discussed with the instructor the perspectives represented. For example, a dinner table scene illustrated the elegant presentation of dishes (products) in a preordained succession (practice). The family conversation around the dinner table and the obvious intimacy of the discussion evoked student insights into the line that separates *la famille et les amis* from *les autres* (p. 23). Even as this chapter is being written, summer institutes and workshops are providing teachers with opportunities to design lessons around the standards framework and to assess units they have done in terms of the model.

CULTURE AS CONTENT IN THE CURRICULAR WEAVE

The standards task force was charged with creating content standards and was responsive to the question: What should students know and be able to do? The *doing* is specified in the standards themselves, whereas the *knowing* is delineated as the myriad curricular experiences in which learners are involved. The interaction between *knowing* and *doing* is illustrated in the standards document as a weave where curricular elements support all the standards (National Standards, p. 29). The strands represented are not finite nor are they parallel; they include content and process. For example, subject matter includes the language system, cultural content, and a vast array of content from other disciplines of interest or import to learners. Processes such as communication strategies, critical thinking skills, learning strategies become vital for successful language learning as students are challenged to work with authentic text, to engage in interpersonal communication with peers, and to surf the Web for information on topics of interest. One element of the weave, technology, addresses the importance of student control over delivery systems and resources that bring language and culture to today’s learners.

In this weave, cultural content forms part of the knowledge base for virtually all the standards, not just the cultural ones discussed above. Th
configuration is what infuses a standards-driven curriculum with culture so that it can never again be treated as an aside. The Communication standards are divided into modes of interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational communication. In the Framework of Communicative Modes, the underlying cultural knowledge is explicated for each of these categories (National Standards, 1996, p. 33). Interpersonal communication is predicated upon the capacity for direct negotiation of meaning to take place between interlocutors. The interpersonal standard requires that students demonstrate in the negotiation "knowledge of cultural perspectives governing interactions between individuals of different ages, statuses, and backgrounds." The framework also calls for learners to develop the "ability to recognize that languages use different practices to communicate" and the "ability to recognize that cultures use different patterns of communication." Experts in specific languages/cultures will need to help teachers acquire that knowledge initially and continue to update themselves as practices and patterns change. By focusing on traditions, conventional approaches to culture frequently failed to track changes occurring in all modern societies. A basic example that impacts interpersonal communication might be the rules governing formal and informal second person pronouns in many European languages. Today's students, negotiating meaning on the Internet with peers, quickly discover that textbook conventions do not necessarily hold true, nor do the societal rules that their teachers experienced in other times and places.

The Interpretive standard requires students to show their "knowledge of how cultural perspectives are embedded in products (literary and artistic), knowledge of how meaning is encoded in products." Learners must also develop the "ability to analyze content, compare it to information available in [one's] own language and assess linguistic and cultural differences" and the "ability to analyze and compare content in one culture to interpret U.S. culture." Within the interpretive mode, the listener/reader/viewer, unable to negotiate meaning with the creator of the text, achieves success by processing language, visual cues, intonation, background knowledge, and the like. The deeper the understanding of the cultural context, the greater the understanding of the total discourse! For example, in a French class taught by the author in spring 1996, students were working with a continuing news feature on Antenne 2 (via SCOLA). Daily stories were broadcast about immigrants in France and the effect of new laws on those sans papiers. The words in the journalistic report were comprehended on a literal level, but students discovered quickly that a lack of adequate background information prevented their fully digesting what was happening. They undertook further research in the language to discern the roots of the problem in former French colonialism, to identify the reasons immigrants had come to France, and to reflect upon concepts of assimilation from the perspec-

tive of the newly arrived and the French. They also found themselves reconsidering their own views on immigration and paying more attention to political discussion and social ramifications of current U.S. immigration policy (Cultural Comparisons standard). As they progressed toward competency in the interpretive mode, they were acquiring new cultural perspectives from observations and knowledge of current and past practices and products (new laws).

The Presentational standard describes the "knowledge of cultural perspectives governing interactions between a speaker and his/her audience and a writer and his/her reader" inherent in this mode. Additionally, students should develop the "ability to present cross-cultural information based on background of the audience" and the "ability to recognize that cultures use different patterns of interaction." Concepts from first language instruction, such as a process approach to writing, when adapted for second languages, can be powerful tools toward achieving this standard. The focus on audience requires attending to cultural expectations and norms for oral and written presentations. The language of an e-mail message or of an interpersonal dialogue, for example, would be inappropriate for a more formal situation. Those differences go well beyond the communicative tasks, or functions, common to today's curriculum, even that based upon a communicative approach. For example, the function of "complaining about a product" is a familiar task in textbooks. Under the standards communicative framework, that could be played out under the interpersonal standard as among acquaintances in a relatively neutral cultural stance. The student might complain through an e-mail exchange about a CD program recently purchased from an international vendor. The interchange might entail minimal cultural references. As the student is encouraged to document that complaint to the vendor with a request for reimbursement or exchange, then appropriate protocols for formal letters (a tilt toward the presentational standard) become prominent. The student writer will need information about exchange policies in the target country. An additional presentational performance might be a newsletter or magazine article that critiques the product, a task that would require attention to the target audience and its culture, as well as explaining the cultural context of the complainant's world. Thus, a common function plays out quite differently depending upon the communicative mode required; one of the parameters will be cultural contexts and practices (All of the preceding quotes are from National Standards, 1996, p. 33).

The cultural weave is a strong strand throughout the standards in the areas of Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. One of the two Connections standards describes a unique outcome of the study of world languages and cultures:
Students acquire information and recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its cultures (Standard 3.2, p. 52).

This standard underscores the cultural insights gained only through the study of a culture's language and constitutes a powerful reason for second-language study.

The Comparisons goal looks at how students "develop insight into the nature of language and culture." Many of our students have little idea about aspects of their lives definitive of their own culture. As they discern the perspectives of others through study of practices and products, insights into their own culture should spring up along with a broader and more generic view of culture as a concept. In the view of many, the Communities goal comprises the ultimate basis for and is the culmination of all experiences in the study of another language. When our students are asked to "Participate in multilingual communities at home and around the world," that is the conclusive test of their linguistic and cultural achievements.

**CULTURE-DRIVEN CURRICULA**

Should, could, would culture drive the curriculum in an environment where standards act as a powerful directional force for learning the world’s languages? Early indications are that as content and as goal, culture increasingly dominates standards implementation. Of the thirty-four learning scenarios in National Standards (1996), twenty-two target directly a culture standard. In the collaborative case studies in the 1997 Northeast Conference Reports (Phillips, 1997), each focused most directly on a different goal area, yet the cultural message was most vibrant one sent from each classroom. If there is an impediment to a culture-driven curriculum, it might be the unease with which teachers confront culture, for their own experiential and knowledge base may be least firmly rooted there. A stated goal of teaching culture in the standards is that students have “opportunities for many different kinds of interaction with members of other cultures, so that students draw informed conclusions and develop sensitivity to the perspectives, practices, and products of others” (p. 45). This goal means that teachers have to do it right in order not to perpetuate the stereotypes. They have to be lifelong learners themselves; they have to have confidence that it is not essential that they have all the answers but that they know how to investigate the issues with their students, how to observe cultures, how to analyze them, and how to suspend judgments until the insights can be confirmed. An important charge lies ahead for teacher educators, for faculty with expertise in language, literature, and cultural studies, as well as for material developers, to assist teachers and learners in using an effective framework for the acquisition of cultural knowledge and the understandings that accompany it.

**REFERENCES**


