

Second Language "Standards For Success": Out Of Touch With Language Acquisition Research

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A list of Standards for Foreign Language Learning has been issued by the University of Oregon Center for Education Policy Research.¹ According to the Standards for Success website,² these standards are part of a larger project covering many different subjects and have been sent to every high school in the United States. It is likely that the standards will be interpreted as guidelines for curriculum.

There is a problem: Most of the standards in the document lead to pedagogy that conflicts with research and theory published in professional journals over the last thirty years. The document, in fact, promotes pedagogy that is the mirror- image of what research says should be going on in foreign language classes.

Contrary to the impression created, Standard for Success is not based on research: It is based on a series of discussions with faculty at several universities. In my view, they were faculty who were clearly out of touch with the field of foreign language pedagogy and second language acquisition research. My guess is that few of those consulted were actively involved in language teaching: Most university foreign language faculty members are specialists in literature and linguistics.

I discuss here a few of the Standards in light of what current second language acquisition (which is based on research) now hypothesizes. I include some citations, but they are only a small sample of the research supporting the points made below.

THE ROLE OF COMPREHENSION

There is an overwhelming amount of research supporting the "Comprehension Hypothesis": We acquire language when we understand what people tell us and what we read. There is no need for deliberate memorization; rather, firm knowledge of grammatical rules (a feel for correctness) and a large vocabulary gradually emerge as language acquirers get more "comprehensible input," aural or written language that is understood.

In support of the Comprehension Hypothesis are many studies showing that foreign language classes that contain more "comprehensible input" produce superior results when compared to traditional classes: Comprehensible input students do far better

on tests of communication and at least as well on grammar tests.³ Also in support are studies showing that more reading in the second language, specifically more voluntary reading, results in improvement in reading, grammar and vocabulary.⁴

Standards for Success does not mention this central idea. The only Standard that mentions comprehension is IC: "Successful students construct meaning from authentic spoken and written sources"⁵ Of the five sub-standards under IC, four deal with literary analysis (identify genre, distinguish main ideas from supporting details, identify literacy devices, analyze literacy devices). In addition, Standard A.8 explicitly insists that students use "mnemonic and memorization strategies to enhance the learning of the target language."⁶

GRAMMAR

Research consistently shows that conscious grammatical knowledge has a limited function, acting only as an editor of what is already produced.

In support of this position are studies showing that even advanced students with a great deal of interest and experience with grammar are able to access only a small amount of their grammatical knowledge when actually using language. Even when students are deliberately focused on form and taught rules carefully, the impact of grammar study is weak.

Current theory recognizes the value of some grammar study, but also recognizes its limitations. For second language users to use grammatical rules, several very stringent conditions must be met:

First, grammar users must know the rule. This is a profound constraint. Professional grammarians have not described all the rules of any language, textbook writers do not include all the rules they know in texts, teachers do not teach all the rules in the text, students do not learn all the rules presented, students do not remember all the rules they learn, and they cannot use all the rules they remember (some are very complex).

Second, grammar users must have time to apply the rule. This is extremely difficult to do in real conversation.

Third, grammar users need to be thinking about correctness, or focused on form. This is hard to do in while communicating a message of interest.

The only time all three conditions are met for most people is when they take a grammar test, and this is where we see the strongest influence of grammar study. But even then, the impact of grammar study is very modest, and studies show it typically fades after a few months; in other words, teaching a rule, even for many hours over several weeks, results in only modestly improved performance primarily on grammar tests, and is rapidly forgotten.⁷

In addition, case studies show that adept second language performers can apply consciously learned grammar rules to make limited improvements in their writing. These rules, however, are generally not available during real conversation.⁸

Standards for Success devotes a complete standard to grammar, insisting that foreign language students recognize parts of speech, understand and compare how simple clauses, tense and aspect are used in English and the second language, and requires that students "apply written conventions accurately in English and the target language."⁹

Theory and research support some study of grammar, but it has consistently shown that the effects of grammar study are very limited. Nowhere is this stated in Standards for Success. Rather, "Structure" is granted an entire category, covering 25% of the total set of Standards.

THE ROLE OF SPEAKING

Theory and research confirm that our ability to speak is a result of language acquisition, not a cause: We acquire language from input, not from output. The evidence for this view comes from several sources:

- People simply do not speak or write enough for output to make any significant contribution.¹⁰
- It is possible to improve and attain very high levels of competence without output.¹¹
- More output does not result in more language acquisition. For example, students in classes that demand more writing do not acquire more of the language,¹² and students of English as a foreign language who report more speaking outside of class do not do better on the TOEFL examination; those who read more outside of class, however, do better.¹³

There is, in addition, evidence that forcing students to speak before they feel ready to is extremely anxiety provoking. When asked what aspects of class cause the most anxiety, students consistently put "speaking" on the top of the list.¹⁴

Nevertheless, Standards for Success assigns a major role to language production. Standard IV A3 insists that students be "willing to speak in the target language in front of teachers, peers and those who are fluent in the target language," a standard that will encourage pedagogy that puts students in a position of maximum anxiety while doing nothing to improve their language abilities.

THE ROLE OF THE FIRST LANGUAGE

According to current theory, we "fall back" on the first language when we need to produce in the second language but lack competence. The influence of the first language is due, thus, to ignorance, not to interference.¹⁵ Consistent with this view are studies showing that the influence of the first language diminishes as students acquire more.¹⁶

Standards for Success actually encourages the use of the first language. Standard A9 says that students should "employ knowledge of their first language to help form and test hypotheses regarding the target language" and Standard III, the set of grammar standards, also insists that students engage in a "conscious comparison" of the grammatical systems of the first and second language.¹⁷ Conscious comparisons may be interesting for grammarians, but they have nothing to do with language acquisition.

WRITING

Theory and research maintains that writing has two separate aspects. Writing "competence," that is, the possession of good writing style, comes from reading, while writing "performance," the ability to use writing to solve problems and come up with new ideas, comes from actual writing itself and the use of certain strategies that can be taught.

Many studies confirm that those who read more write better.¹⁸ Studies also fail to show a relationship between writing quantity and writing style¹⁹: it is reading, not

instruction, that helps us develop a good writing style. This is a reasonable finding: The system of "planned discourse," or the structure of academic writing, is extremely complex, and only the most obvious aspects can be taught directly. The most plausible hypothesis is that most aspects of writing are absorbed gradually from extensive reading.

The ability to use writing to solve problems comes from mastery of the "composing process." Good writers, research tells us, utilize certain strategies that help them do this: They plan, but their plans are flexible,²⁰ they are willing to revise,²¹ they reread what they have written,²² and they delay editing until all their ideas are on the page.²³ Peter Elbow suggests, in addition, that good writers delay considerations of audience until the paper has gone through several drafts.²⁴

Communication Skills Standard IB covers both writing competence (writing style) and performance (the use of writing to solve problems), but does not distinguish the two. B1 lists some strategies that are part of the "writing" (composing) process, but does not tell us why they are desirable for students to master. B2 asks students to be able to "use some basic cohesive devices" in writing, an aspect of form that may emerge as a result of reading. B3 asks writers to develop awareness of audience, context and genre "throughout a prepared composition or speech," suggesting that second language users consider subtle aspects of form while composing, violating the composing process.²⁵

Completely absent from the discussion is whether aspects of the composing process transfer from the first language. Research now suggests that those who plan, revise and delay editing in their first language also do this in their second language.²⁶ It may be that Standard B1 belongs elsewhere, as a language arts standard.

CONCLUSION

Standards, unfortunately, are often used not simply as goals but as guides to pedagogy. The standards set by the Oregon Center will result in a pedagogical approach that emphasizes grammar, output, and an explicit reliance on the first language. Current theory comes to conclusions that are completely opposite: language acquisition is a result of input, grammar plays a peripheral role in second language performance, and first language influence is simply the result of a lack of acquisition of the second language. The Standards also are uninformed about basic writing theory and research.

It should be pointed out that this criticism is not based on the fact that the Standards are focused on literature as the goal of foreign language study. The study of literature is without question a primary goal of foreign language study. But the Standards encourage a curriculum and methodology that is inappropriate for any use of the foreign language, for literature, science, business, or simply getting to know people from other countries and of other cultures.

I do not propose that theory and research should fully determine teaching methodology: The ideas and intuitions of expert teachers should be given at least as much weight. In addition, the creators of the Standards are certainly free to disagree with my version of theory. But they are not free to completely ignore all research on second language acquisition and teaching.

Notes

1. I thank Karen Rowan for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
2. Standards for Success, <http://www.s4s.org>.
3. For studies at the beginning level, see James Asher, "Children's First Language as a Model for Second Language Learning," *Modern Language Journal*, vol. 56, 1972, pp. 133-139; James Asher, "Children Learning Another Language: A Developmental Hypothesis," *Child Development*, vol. 58, no. 1-2, 1977, pp. 24-32; Ali Isik, "The Role of Input in Second Language Acquisition: More Comprehensible Input Supported by Grammar Instruction or More Grammar Instruction?" *ITL: Review of Applied Linguistics*, vol. 129-130, 2000, pp. 225-274; Michel Nicola, "Experimenting with the New Methods," *Dialog on Language Instruction*, vol. 6, 1989, pp. 61-71; Harris Winitz, "Grammaticality Judgments as a Function of Explicit and Implicit Instruction in Spanish," *Modern Language Journal*, vol. 80, no. 1, 1996, pp. 32-46. For intermediate level, i.e. teaching language through content or "sheltered subject matter teaching," see e.g. Harry Edwards, Mari Wesche, Stephen Krashen, Richard Clement, and Bastian Kruidenier, "Second- Language Acquisition through Subject-Matter Learning: A Study of Sheltered Subject-Matter Classes at the University of Ottawa," *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, vol. 41, 1985, pp. 268-282; Philip Hauptman, Mari Wesche, and Doreen Ready, "Second-Language Acquisition Through Subject Matter Learning: A Follow-Up Study at the University of Ottawa," *Language Learning*, vol. 38, 1988, pp. 433-471; Robert Lafayette and Michael Buscaglia, "Students Learn Language via a Civilization Course - A Comparison of Second Language Acquisition Environments." *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, vol. 7, 1985, pp. 323-342.

4. Jeffery Stokes, Stephen Krashen, and John Kartchner, "Factors in the Acquisition of the Present Subjunctive in Spanish," *ITL: Review of Applied Linguistics*, vol. 121-122, 1998, pp. 19-25; Yon Ok Lee, Stephen Krashen, and Barry Gribbons, "The Effect of Reading on the Acquisition of English Relative Clauses," *ITL: Review of Applied Linguistics*, vol. 113-114, 1996, pp. 263-273; Warwick Elley and Francis Mangubhai, "The Impact of Reading on Second Language Learning," *Reading Research Quarterly*, vol. 19, 1983, pp. 53-67; Warwick Elley, "Acquiring Literacy in a Second Language: The Effect of Book-Based Programs," *Language Learning*, vol. 41, no. 3, 1991, pp. 375-411; Kyung-Sook Cho and Stephen Krashen, "Acquisition of Vocabulary from the Sweet Valley Kids Series: Adult ESL Acquisition," *Journal of Reading*, vol. 37, 1994, pp. 662-667; Beniko Mason and Stephen Krashen, "Extensive Reading in English as a Foreign Language," *System*, vol. 25, 1997, pp. 91-102.
5. Standards for Success, op. cit.
6. Standards for Success, op. cit.
7. John Truscott, "Noticing in Second Language Acquisition: A Critical Review," *Second Language Research*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1998, pp. 103-135; Stephen Krashen, "Seeking a Role for Grammar: A Review of Some Recent Studies," *Foreign Language Annals*, vol. 32, no. 2, 1999, pp. 245-257.
8. Stephen Krashen, *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1981). Available for free downloading at <http://www.sdkrashen.com>.
9. Standards for Success, op. cit.
10. Stephen Krashen, "The Input Hypothesis and its Rivals." In Nick Ellis, ed., *Implicit and Explicit Learning of Languages* (London: Academic press, 1994). pp. 45-77. Stephen Krashen, *Explorations in Language Acquisition and Use: The Taipei Lectures*. (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003).
11. Krashen, 1994, op. cit.
12. Sandra Burger, "Content-Based ESL in a Sheltered Psychology Course: Input, Output, and Outcomes," *TESL Canada*, vol. 6 (1989), pp. 45-59.
13. Harry Gradman and Edith Hanania, "Language Learning Background Factors and ESL Proficiency," *Modern Language Journal*, vol. 75 (1991), pp. 39-51.
14. Dolly Jesusita Young, "An Investigation of Students' Perspectives on Anxiety and Speaking," *Foreign Language Annals*, vol. 23 (1990), pp. 539-553; Steven Loughrin-Sacco, "More than Meets the Eye: An Ethnology of an Elementary French Class," *Canadian Modern Language Review*, vol. 49 (1992), pp. 80-101.
15. Leonard Newmark, "How Not to Interfere with Language Learning." *International Journal of American Linguistics*, vol. 40 (1966), 77-83.
16. Stephen Krashen, "Newmark's 'Ignorance Hypothesis' and Current Second Language Acquisition Theory," In Susan Gass and Larry Selinker, eds., *Language Transfer in Language Learning* (New York: Newbury House, 1983). pp. 135-153.
17. Standards for Success, op. cit.

18. Elley and Mangubhai, op. cit, Sy-Ying Lee, *What Makes It Difficult to Write: Theory, Research, and Implications* (Taipei, Crane Publishing Company 2001). For an interesting second language study, see Michael Janopoulos, "The Relationship of Pleasure Reading and Second Language Writing Proficiency," *TESOL Quarterly* vol. 20, no. 4 (1986). pp. 763-768.
19. Krashen, 1994, op. cit.; Lee, 2001, op. cit.
20. e.g. Janet Emig, *The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders*. (Urbana, National Council of Teachers of English, 1971).
21. e.g. Nancy Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," *College Composition and Communication*," vol. 31 (1980), pp. 378- 88.
22. e.g. Sharon Pianko, "A Description of the Composing Processes of College Freshman Writers," *Research in the Teaching of English* vol. 13 (1979) pp; 5-22
23. e.g. Lester Faigley and Stephen Witte, "Analyzing Revision," *College Composition and Communication* vol. 32 (1981) pp. 400-414.
24. Peter Elbow, *Writing With Power* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1981).
25. Standards for Success, op. cit.
26. Chris Hall, "Managing the Complexity of Revising across Languages," *TESOL Quarterly* vol. 24, no. 1 (1990), pp. 43-60; Miyuki Sasaki and Keiko Hirose, Explanatory Variables for EFL Students' Expository Writing," *Language Learning* vol. 46, no. 1 (1996) pp: 175-182; Sy-Ying Lee and Stephen Krashen, "Writer's Block: Is it Universal? Does it Transfer across Languages?" *In Selected papers from the Eleventh International Symposium on English Teaching/Fourth Pan-Asian Conference*. (English Teachers Association/ROC, 2002) pp. 432-439.