

**Language Teaching Standards at the Center of Opposite Language Teaching Theories:
Mentalism vs. Behaviorism**

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Abstract

Broadly speaking, teaching standards outline a holistic view of language teaching because foreign language teaching is not like other school subjects. It serves multi-tasks

(i) communicating ideas, developing understanding, cementing social interaction and so on, encompasses human knowledge. In short, it is the doorway to wisdom.

The paper has an attempt to shed the light on the implications of some language learning theories in language teaching standards.

It is very plain that mentalism and behaviorism are two dominating orthodoxies in foreign language learning surveys. The direct requirement of this premise is that language teaching standards have either mentalism or behaviorism underpinnings.

My concern in this paper is to show that despite the seeming discrepancy between these orthodoxies, they have a consensus that foreign language teaching revolves around five axes, conceived as standards, and called 5 Cs: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons and Communities.

Keywords: Language teaching standards, mentalism, behaviorism, foreign language learning theories.

1. Introduction

The beginning of the interest in the relationship between language learning theories and language teaching standards can be dated back to the late 19th century. The origin of this conviction is that teaching standards are derived from divergent teaching methods principles that have mentalism and behaviorism underpinnings. David (1995) claimed, “Second language acquisition researchers have generally utilized the research techniques dominant in psychological studies that are characterized by the philosophical perspectives of mentalism, behaviorism and individualism” (p.428).

Since its birth in the 1890s, till nowadays, foreign language learning/teaching witnessed persistent attention, a vital interrogation recurrently posed: which is the ultimate purpose behind language learning? (Tonkin, 2003, p.145; Merritt, 2013). The debate regarding such issue reached its peak between, mentalism and behaviorism, the most prevalent paradigms in linguistic literature and led to (i) emergence of FLT and SLA as two major disciplines in applied linguistics, (ii) the birth to ten or so teaching methods in one century and (iii) the development of language teaching standards.

Some preliminaries

What does the term standard mean?

Even if we consider the simplest dictionary definition of the word standard which is “a level of excellence or quality”, then, it is easy to unravel the relation between the meaning of standard and foreign language learning. Clearly, it is deduced that scholars from different doctrines seek to standardize foreign language teaching with the purpose to ensure a common level of excellence in learning a foreign language.

In language teaching realm, the label standard is a technical term that refers to “(...) expressions of language expectations of language learners as they move through a series of predictable stages on the pathway toward acquiring a new language” (Gottlieb, 2009, p.19). Principally, language teaching standards outline a collective desire to promote foreign language learning. Fleurquin (2009) asserted

Teachers, students, parents, administrators, policymakers, and the entire community can benefit from the definition of parameters that identify goals, procedures, best practices, or final results. Standards provide a framework for all stakeholders to understand educational processes and results. There are different kinds of standards in ESL/EFL education, and TESOL has played a crucial role in the development of new standards for the international community (p.3).

The reference twice to “the entire community and the international community” in the quotation mentioned above, implies two things: (i) teaching standards carried on a philological school project that is interested in the relation between language, customs and institutions (DeSaussure,1995,p.1), and (ii) teaching standards were conceived as universal rules or principles regulating foreign language learning worldwide, regardless the learned

language and the theoretical discrepancies underlying foreign language teaching methods (Smith,2009,p.24). In the same vein, Kean, Grady and Sandrock (2001) wrote

These standards are standards for all languages taught in Wisconsin schools, which at the time of printing include American Sign Language, Chinese, French, German, Hebrew, Japanese, Latin, Menominee, Norwegian, Ojibwe, Oneida, Russian, and Spanish. All of these languages have unique characteristics that may require some modifications in the standards to reflect their special traits. (p.2)

The influence of Chomsky's universal grammar is sounded in the foregoing quotation in the fact that all languages have common characteristics. This conviction, that languages have something common, triggered the development of the comparisons standards, it is through comparisons between the language learned and the native language that a new language is easily learned.

The historicity of the teaching standards

The development of language teaching standards was not overnight, it was a piecemeal process, and it passed through two major phases. In 1993, a coalition of four national language organizations (the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, the American Association of Teachers of French, the American Association of Teachers of German, and the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese), jointly sought to improve and expand the teaching and the learning of some foreign languages, French, German, Spanish and Portuguese at all levels of instruction(ACTFL: Standards for foreign language learning Preparing for the 21st Century).

Such coalition took the initiative to develop standards for teaching such languages in some American preparatory and elementary schools in Wisconsin, that is why those standards are well known as Wisconsin standards "These Wisconsin standards for foreign language learning are based on an instructional program in languages other than English for all students beginning in kindergarten and continuing through 12th grade" (Kean, Grady & Sandrock ,2001, p.1).

Later on, in a second phase, a team including eleven experts, representing a variety of languages, levels of instruction, program models, and regions, members in such national language organizations, were appointed to undertake the task of outlining the content standards (ibid). The first draft of the document was refined several times, it was sent to languages teachers, course designers and pedagogues for feedbacks. After negotiations, writing and rewriting the standards were confirmed (Blaz, 2002, p.2). At the beginning language, specific standards covered only a few language, French, German, Spanish and Portuguese after six years, in 1999, Chinese, classical languages, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Russian and Spanish were included.

Two important points are worth noting from what is mentioned above. First, national native language and other languages are included in the language teaching standards project which implies that this project is built on a general theory of language learning that " language learning policies include national language(s), minority and immigrant languages as well as foreign languages"(De Jager and Meer,2007, p.5).

Second, some languages, French, German, Spanish and Portuguese, have a special privilege. Jager and Meer (2007) noted “most of the studies and projects are focused on the teaching and learning of foreign national languages and some of them on the learning and teaching of the national mother-tongue(s). Only a few projects are focused on the learning and teaching of regional or minority languages, or immigrant languages (ibid).

2. The principles of language teaching standards and language learning theories

a. An overview of language teaching standards

One conviction triggered the project of the development of language teaching standards, the conviction that teaching language is unlike other school subjects, but it has influences on another curriculum, “ Whatever the subject, all knowledge building in the school context involves working with language” (Beacco et al, 2010, p.5). The American Council on the teaching of foreign languages (ACTFL) and the (TESOL) Teachers of English to Speakers of other languages introduce the languages teaching standards in the form of major and minor/derived maxims:

The first standard called the communication standard, which defines the aim of learning a foreign language. It is to communicate, express one’s feelings and emotions, cementing social interaction and developing human knowledge in languages other than the native language.

- **Standard 1.1:** Students engage in conversations, provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, and exchange opinions.
- **Standard 1.2:** Students understand and interpret written and spoken language on a variety of topics.
- **Standard 1.3:** Students present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners or readers on a variety of topics.

The second standard has to deal with culture, language is mandatory to gain knowledge and understand other cultures.

- **Standard 2.1:** Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied
- **Standard 2.2:** Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the studied culture.

The third standard coined connections. As its name denotes, this standard stands for the connection between foreign language learning and general information acquisition.

- **Standard 3.1:** Students reinforce and further their knowledge of other disciplines through the foreign language
- **Standard 3.2:** Students acquire information and recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its cultures.

Comparison is the fourth standard. As its name suggests, it is through comparisons that a learner can develop insights into the nature of different languages and cultures.

- **Standard 4.1:** Students demonstrate understanding of the nature of language through comparisons of the language studied and their own.
- **Standard 4.2:** Students demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own.

Fifth, learning a foreign language ultimately aims at building an international community without geographical frontiers through participating in multilingual communities at home and around the world.

- **Standard 5.1:** Students use the language both within and beyond the school setting
- **Standard 5.2:** Students show evidence of becoming life-long learners by using the language for personal enjoyment and enrichment.

b. The echo of behaviorism and mentalism in language teaching standards

So as to delve into the implications of both behaviorism and mentalism as two prevalent linguistic paradigms, in the development of language teaching standards, it is imperative to review the major tenets of such schools regarding foreign language learning.

Even if we browse through mentalism and behaviorism literature, it is easy to note that the five Cs, Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities, are axial concepts in many works (Bloomfield 1993; Byram & Morgan, 1994; Lado, 1993).

The second, evidence of the influence of behaviorism and mentalism on language teaching standards is the common axiom starting point, that language is a human property, Sapir (1949) wrote “The gift of speech and a well-ordered language are characteristic of every known group of human beings” (p.1). This axiomatic truth is sounded in the teaching philosophy statement which introduces a global idea about the teaching and learning process and describes how to teach and rationale for why to teach in a particular way. It is stated that “language and communication at the heart of the human experience”.

- A third clue of the influence is that decades before the birth of language teaching standards, many pioneering works are interested in the relation between language and culture (Sapir, 1949; Bouton, 1974; Byram & Morgan, 1994).

- In accordance, with behaviorist theory there is an inextricable bond between language and culture, Bloomfield (1993) claimed that “Every language serves as the bearer of culture. If you speak a language you take part, to some degree, in the way of living represented by that language. Each system of culture has its own way of looking at things and people and dealing with them.” (p.40). Also, many works in foreign language learning deal with such relation (Stevick, 1982; Kramsh, 2003). Such works conceive learner as a cultural being. Wajnryb (2006) wrote “when learning a language a learner is also learning about a culture, a learner is a cultural being with a cultural perspective on the world including culture-specific expectations of the classroom and learning processes, a cultural dimension of the learner has to be considered and respected, positive attitudes towards the culture of the target language is a favorable factor in language learning (p.40). Similarly, as an active agent in the learning process, a teacher’s language mastery is not enough for teaching, knowledge about the culture of the target language is essential. Byram and Morgan (1994), noted that “teachers believe that knowledge of the grammatical system of a language has to be complementary by the understanding of culture specific meaning (...) information about social institutions and geographical features of the country—family structures, education systems, political parties, regional industries, for example, necessary support or background to the knowledge of grammar and meaning (...) it is axiomatic in our view that cultural learning has to take place as an integral part of language learning and vice versa” (pp.4-5).

Accordingly, both learner and teacher are considered as cultural beings, and their positive attitude towards the culture of the target language is a favorable factor enhancing language learning and language teaching (Kramsh, 2003, p.2003 Wajnryb, 2006, p.40; Gardner, 1960). A third evidence of the interface between language learning theories and

language teaching standards is the fact that approximately, one century before the emergence of language teaching standards, comparative linguistics that is concerned with comparing languages to establish their historical relatedness, provided many techniques and methods to compare different languages. Such techniques were first borrowed by FL scholars (Troike, 2006, p.13-14; Lado, 1993, pp.79-86), to pick out the hallmark features of languages, such techniques have a very plain implication in the development of comparisons teaching standards that consists in comparing native language and culture with other languages so as to develop insight into the nature of different languages and cultures. Forth, the value of foreign language theories in the elaboration of language teaching standards resides in the fact that they answer a common inquiry that is “why learn a second or third language? There is a common axiomatic premise that human beings use language to communicate, to interact, to express one’s feelings, emotions. Accordingly, communication is an axial theme in many works in second and foreign language learning theories (Skehan, 1998; Schachter,1989). And in the same vein that the notion of communicative competence which is defined as “the ability to know intuitively what is socially appropriate or inappropriate, and the ability to adjust language use to such factors as the topic, situation and human relation involved this allows accompanied with no interest to linguistic forms and meaning(Stern,1992,p.73) is involved in the realm of FLL studies and then language teaching standards.

Fifth Sapir’s (1949) conviction that “language is becoming increasingly valuable as a guide to the scientific study of a given culture. In a sense, the network of cultural patterns of civilization is indexed in the language which expresses that civilization” (p.68), is felt in the “connections’ standards” which ties in language learning and other disciplines to acquire information.

Finally, another intersection between language learning theories and language teaching standards is the great desire among FL scholars to set up an international community regardless of the ideological, cultural, ethnic discrepancies, through language learning. In this vein, regarding the relation between learning a foreign language and communities Bloomfield(1993)wrote “to the extent that you have learned to speak and understand a foreign tongue, to that extent you have learned to respond with a different selection and emphasis to the world around you(p.40). for the same reason that The advocators of the community language learning method metaphorically depict the classroom like a community, the classmates and teachers must be cooperative to reduce the threat of the new learning situation (Freeman,2000. pp95-100).

Concluding remarks

The analysis of teaching language standards in the light of language learning theories disclose four things :

- First, the development of the language teaching standards is intricately related to language learning theories.
- Second, it unravels that the clash between behavior and mentalism, as two main dominating linguistic mainstreams, regarding many issues related to foreign language teaching, it is hardly more than an ostensible clash.
- Third, foreign language teaching is not a simple school subject (Fleming,2006,p.9), but Language teaching standards conceive foreign language teaching as a school subject that has implications in all school subjects. The most obvious clue is that some standards are full of proficiencies.

- Forth, third, language teaching standards state what students should know and be able to do as a result of ESL instruction and set goals for students' social and academic language development and sociocultural competence.
- Fifth, the teaching standards are important not only for teachers and learners of languages, but other institutions are also concerned (policymakers, businessmen...).

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