



Context Module

ACTFL's Standards of Foreign Language Learning and the Principles of Universal Design for Instruction

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What are the Standards and what is their function in guiding L2 instructional excellence?

The Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century—first developed in 1996 by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages in collaboration with other professional organizations devoted to foreign language instruction—presents a vision of what American students should know and be able to do in a second language. Commonly called the ACTFL Standards or the 5 Cs, these principles identify the primary sociolinguistic and cultural elements of language learning and suggest ways to lead students toward a more advanced linguistic and cultural proficiency. *Knowing how, when, and why to say what to whom* is a common shorthand for the student skills the standards point to.

Initially developed for the K-12 student, the standards have been augmented by individual language task forces to encompass the postsecondary learner. The five interconnected standards are not performance standards, but rather content goals. They do not describe how well students are doing, nor do they privilege particular pedagogical methods. Instead, they provide direction and an organizing sense of purpose to instructors.

The standards include:

Communication: Students are able to communicate in languages other than English;

Cultures: Students gain knowledge and understanding of other cultures;

Connections: Students connect with other disciplines and acquire information;

Comparisons: Students develop insight into the nature of language and culture; and

Communities: Students participate in multilingual communities at home and around the world.

The most recent edition of the Standards (2006) has been expanded to include language-specific learning scenarios and sample classroom activities, drafted by active practitioners, that model the outcomes and values of the standards within a target language. These activities are included not to endorse a precise path toward language proficiency, but rather “as an illustration that will engender reflection, creativity, planning, and implementation of new learning scenarios” (274). One activity suggested for college-level French students is a group project on newscasts. The description of the learning scenario is followed by a reflection devoted to the specific standards that the illustration targets.

Les Actualités: A French Newscast (post-secondary)

Students in a college intermediate French class prepare and film their own new broadcast, *Les actualités*. First, they view televised news broadcasts from France or Quebec and compare and contrast American and French or Canadian news broadcasts. As preparation for their own project, students are assigned to play roles and/or participate in the preparation of various segments of the program, for example, news anchor, sportscaster, weather person, traffic reporter, film critic, restaurant reviewer, celebrity interviewer, and advertising spots. The first assignment is the preparation of the scripts. These are corrected and returned, and students are encouraged to rehearse by recording their texts in the laboratory. One class day is then devoted to a “dry run” of the program, and a subsequent day is devoted to the filming. Students are evaluated on their first assignment, their rewrite of the errors noted, their production of French in the assigned role, and the group’s final product, their video. If several sections of intermediate French each prepare their own programs, these can be performed for an evening of entertainment with the French Club.

Reflection

1.1 Interpersonal communication

Students discuss with one another in French how to put together the program.

1.2 Interpretive communication

Students listen to authentic news broadcasts in French and to one another’s presentations during the filming, and then view the final video.

1.3 Presentational communication

Students present a news segment in French.

4.2 Cultural comparisons

Students compare American news broadcasts with French or French-Canadian news broadcasts.

5.1 School and community

The newscast video is shown to friends, parents, and other students at the university.

Students bring tremendous creativity and enthusiasm to this project. The journalism students [who are enrolled in the class] help frame the filming, the art students produce marvelous backdrops and graphics, and the theater students show creativity in developing the “advertisements” and public service announcements. The ultimate reward, of course, is the final product, which students copy and keep for themselves (275-276).

Diverse students: Inclusive language permeates the rationale for the standards but are the needs of students with disabilities considered?

The language of inclusion is a hallmark of the standards. Indeed, the standards’ statement of philosophy—the guiding principles adopted by the steering committee—begins with inclusion: “The United States must educate students who are equipped linguistically and culturally to communicate successfully in a pluralistic American society and abroad. This imperative envisions a future in which ALL students will develop and maintain proficiency in English and at least one other language, modern or classical” (7, original emphasis). This recognition of student diversity, underscored by an express language of inclusion, continues throughout the standards. Consider the frequency with which the authors stress meeting the needs of all students in the classroom:

- “Students once shut out of language courses prosper in classrooms that acknowledge that ALL students are capable of learning other languages given opportunities for quality instruction” (18-19).
- “Students with varying needs all require access to language instruction that will allow them to: (1) maintain existing strengths in the language; (2) develop strengths in areas in which the home background has not provided support; and (3) use the language for reading and writing” (20).
- “All children are primed to learn languages, and they will rise to meet expectations, when goals are appropriately set and the conditions for learning are designed to foster achievement” (24).

While diversity is a prominent characteristic of the standards, and while the authors maintain that foreign language educators are typically well prepared to undertake standards development for all students (15), the learning needs of students with disabilities are not expressly addressed. Yet, as we know, 11% of college students are students with disabilities. This phenomenon begs

an important question: Are there elements of L2 instructional design that need to be intentionally considered in order to teach *all* students, including students with disabilities?

The French newscast learning scenario, for instance, may take certain nonessential student abilities for granted. For example, is there an assumption that all students will be able to hear and see the newscasts, write or type a script, and interact effectively with others to complete a group project? For a Deaf student, a student with a visual impairment, a student with Asperger's syndrome, or a student with a learning disability there may be some inherent barriers in the way an instructional task has been designed. To provide a more completely inclusive instruction, to provide opportunities for all students to learn a foreign language, practitioners will need to take a broad range of learners into account.

The Principles of Universal Design for Instruction (UDI)

Universal Design for Instruction (UDI) is an approach to considering and designing pedagogy that is inclusive of individuals with disabilities as well as other diverse learners (Scott, McGuire, & Shaw, 2003). Nine principles of UDI have been articulated to guide the development or revision of college level instruction to proactively consider diverse learners. Through awareness of student diversity, identification of potential barriers to learning, and an intentional use of inclusive strategies, the UDI framework is designed to support faculty in a broad range of academic disciplines. By using the UDI principles, emphasis is placed on minimizing the need for retroactive changes or “special” accommodations for individual students with disabilities. A premise of UDI is that instructional strategies that consider the needs of students with disabilities will also benefit many students in today's increasingly diverse student population including students of non-traditional age, students whose native language is not English, and first generation college students among others.

UDI was derived from the concept of Universal Design, an approach to access originating in the physical environment. Universal design consists of proactively incorporating features in architecture and product design that consider a broad range of users and result in products that are more “usable” to individuals with a wide range of abilities and needs. Examples of UD have become commonplace; automatic door openers, screen readers, and captioned text on television are widely available. What originated as a design feature for an individual with a disability resulted in a product that was more convenient and more “usable” by many people. Parents with baby strollers, travelers with luggage, and teenagers on skateboards all appreciate the increased functionality of a sidewalk curb cut often associated with wheelchair access. When the concept of Universal Design is applied to instruction (UDI), the same thought process applies—anticipating diversity and building in inclusive features from the design stage that benefit many people. UDI has been described as the equivalent of a *cognitive* curb cut. (For further information on how this framework was systematically developed, see Scott, McGuire, & Foley, 2003.)

Table 1 provides a list of the nine Principles of UDI with definitions and examples from L2 instruction. The ACTFL Standards and the nine Principles of UDI share common features. Both define instructional excellence and identify key elements of effective instruction. Both provide a framework for instructors to examine their pedagogy. And both challenge instructors to apply these organizing principles in their specific contexts with individual students. Though focal points across the frameworks are different (excellence in L2 instruction vs. a cross-disciplinary emphasis on inclusive instruction), there are, not surprisingly, points of intersection with content. In our work with modern language faculty with extensive L2 teaching experience, we examined the nine UDI Principles in tandem with the ACTFL Standards. Drawing on L2 expertise and decades of successful college teaching, the group resonated strongly with Principle 1, Equitable use; Principle 2, Flexibility in use; Principle 5, Tolerance for error; Principle 8, A community of learners, and Principle 9, Instructional climate as principles that correlate closely with the ACTFL Standards and are commonly incorporated in L2 classrooms. Discussion of students with disabilities in these areas may call for creative problem solving (e.g., how might an instructor modify the design of a group activity to include a student with a disability in social interaction such as Asperger's syndrome?), but attending to classroom climate and community dynamics are pedagogical areas familiar to foreign language faculty.

Other UDI principles presented new considerations. Principle 4, Perceptible information drew instructor attention to often presumed sensory abilities such as seeing and hearing in the classroom or language lab. Principle 3, Simple and intuitive lead to a discussion of essential and non-essential complexity in L2 learning. Are complex test instructions or poorly constructed syllabi unintended barriers to learning? Principle 6, Low physical effort and Principle 7 Size and space for approach and use both raised awareness of the physical aspects of moving and participating in an active L2 learning environment.

With a focus on inclusive college instruction that considers physical, sensory, social and cognitive domains, the Principles of UDI have the potential to enrich L2 instructors' framing and approach to preparing instruction for all students. Returning now to our French newscast example, how might the UDI Principles assist instructors in incorporating more inclusive teaching strategies?

UDI Reflection

Principle 1, Equitable Use: The assignment is posted on the class web site so students have the option to enlarge the font or use assistive technology to read the assignment aloud.

Principle 3, Simple and intuitive: Samples of exemplary student work from previous semesters are posted on the class website. A grading rubric is provided so all students understand the essential components of the assignment.

Principle 4, Perceptible Information: News broadcasts are close captioned allowing all students to see the narrative. As part of preparing for the project, students work in groups to develop a verbal description in French of what is occurring on the screen during the newscast. This assignment builds vocabulary and allows all students to “see” the newscast.

Principle 5, Tolerance for Error: In preparation for the project, class members from different groups but sharing the same broadcasting role (e.g., the film critics from each group) meet to brainstorm characteristics of their role and identify key vocabulary providing a learning resource for students of different skill levels.

Summary

The Standards, as a cohesive vision of effective pedagogy, recognize and celebrate the distinctiveness of the foreign language classroom:

Pedagogically, [the content of a FL class] is enhanced by the methods used to teach FLs: the use of images and items from real life for sharpening perception, a wide variety of physical activities and games, involvement in role play and other dramatic activities, the use of music in both receptive and participatory modes, and learning experiences that call for sequencing, memorizing, problem solving as well as both inductive and deductive reasoning. This broad range of language learning strategies appeals to a variety of learning styles and expands the learner’s awareness of the many dimensions of his/her own intelligence (12).

Yet, because the 5Cs are descriptive rather than prescriptive, and because they only hint at ways to increase classroom diversity, they must be used in conjunction with other frameworks to determine the best approaches and reasonable expectations for the students in individual educational settings. UDI is a vital resource for inclusion whose values compare favorably with the flexibility, thoughtfulness, variety, and adaptability of the 5 Cs. UDI also anticipates diversity and inclusive learning that are hallmarks of sound L2 instruction.

References

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (2006). *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century*. Alexandria, VA: National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project.

Scott, S., McGuire, J., & Foley, T. (2003). Universal Design for Instruction: A framework for anticipating and responding to disability and other diverse learning needs in the college classroom. *Equity and Excellence in Education*, 36(1), 40-49.

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Table 1

The 9 Principles of Universal Design for Instruction©

Applied to Foreign Language Learning

| Principle | Definition | Example(s) in L2 Instruction |
|---|--|--|
| <u>Principle 1</u> : Equitable use | Instruction is designed to be useful to and accessible by people with diverse abilities. Provide the same means of use for all students; identical whenever possible, equivalent when not. | Provide the class syllabus, materials and links to other resources on-line. |
| <u>Principle 2</u> : Flexibility in use | Instruction is designed to accommodate a wide range of individual abilities. Provide choice in methods of use. | Use varied instructional methods (verbal information with visual prompts, group activities, use of stories, or web board based discussions) to provide different ways of learning and experiencing knowledge. Switch to a new activity/method every 10 minutes to support attention. |
| <u>Principle 3</u> : Simple and intuitive | Instruction is designed in a straightforward and predictable manner, regardless of the student’s experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level. Eliminate unnecessary complexity. | Provide a grading rubric that clearly lays out expectations for speaking activities; include information on how expectations for verbal performance will increase over time. |
| <u>Principle 4</u> : Perceptible | Instruction is designed so that necessary information is communicated effectively to | Consider the “readability” of all written documents |

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| information | the student, regardless of ambient conditions or the student's sensory abilities. | provided to students. Review instructor-made tests, quizzes, and activities for adequate spacing between items, clear labeling, and easily readable font. |
| <u>Principle 5</u> : Tolerance for error | Instruction anticipates variation in individual student learning pace and prerequisite skills. | Anticipate different entry level skills of students in using the target language. Provide a list of frequently used phrases to support target language use from the first day of class. Clarify that in language acquisition, mistakes are expected as part of the learning process. |
| <u>Principle 6</u> : Low physical effort | Instruction is designed to minimize nonessential physical effort in order to allow maximum attention to learning. Note: This principle does not apply when physical effort is integral to essential requirements of a course. | Allow students to use a computer for writing and editing papers or essay exams. Arrange classroom desks in a semi-circle to allow students to see other students speaking during class. |
| <u>Principle 7</u> : Size and space for approach and use | Instruction is designed with consideration for appropriate size and space for approach, reach, manipulations, and use regardless of a student's body size, posture, mobility, and communication needs. | Set up group activities that consider the mobility needs of all students. Structure class space (e.g., desk arrangement) or student movement (e.g., rotating group membership) to allow for all students to participate. |

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| <p><u>Principle 8:</u> A community of learners</p> | <p>The instructional environment promotes interaction and communication among students and between students and faculty.</p> | <p>Foster communication among students in and out of class by structuring outside cultural activities, language club, or a language table in the dining hall.</p> <p>Use frequent group activities that involve different size and group membership.</p> |
| <p><u>Principle 9:</u> Instructional climate</p> | <p>Instruction is designed to be welcoming and inclusive. High expectations are espoused for all students.</p> | <p>Discuss with students beginning on the first day of class expectations for target language use. Clarify reasonable goals for growth and improvement in target language fluency during the semester.</p> |

* Note: Adapted from *Principles of Universal Design for Instruction* by Sally S. Scott, Joan M. McGuire, and Stan F. Shaw, Center on Postsecondary Education and Disability, University of Connecticut. Copyright 2001.