

More Than a Decade of Standards: Integrating “Comparisons” in Your Language Instruction



By SANDY CUTSHALL

EDITOR'S NOTE: In this issue, we continue our series of articles focused on the National Standards for Language Learning, or the “5 Cs.” In the February, April, and August issues of the magazine, we highlighted the goal areas of Communication, Cultures, and Connections, respectively. Here, we look at Comparisons of languages and cultures. In our final article in this series we will focus on Communities.

Comparisons

Are students better able to reflect on their own language and culture after learning another? By engaging in comparisons between their language and the language they are studying, and between their culture and the culture of people who speak the language they are studying, can learners develop not only a greater understanding of their own language and culture—but also of language and culture in the broadest sense? They can, asserts the “4th C”—the Comparisons goal area of the National Standards, which arises directly out of these ideas.

“When students study another language and participate in communicative interactions, the actual experiential dimension makes such an understanding more real,” says the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* document. “By struggling with how to express particular meanings in a second language, how to encode them linguistically, and how to be sensitive to norms of politeness in another culture, students gain awareness of the nature of language itself.”

Although Comparisons joins Connections and Communities as the goal areas that have been less well understood and given less attention in many language classrooms than

either Communication or Cultures, this is in fact considered to be a very important area of language education and one that strongly relates to all the other goals.

“I do believe that the Comparisons Standards should be intimately integrated into all teaching and learning,” says Jacqueline Bott Van Houten, world language and international education consultant in the Kentucky Department of Education. “But I think it’s changed over the years since the Standards came out, because they helped us move away from focusing on grammar to focusing on communication and the function of language. In the early days, I think the comparisons of language were all explicitly taught and were grammar-based. Because language has become more communicatively approached in the classroom, teachers are trying to get students to *discover* more than simply be taught.”

“This goal area is certainly a complex one,” says Renate Schulz, Professor Emerita of German at the University of Arizona, “and it’s one I believe is really not addressed often enough. Comparisons are very powerful and I think that comparisons of languages and cultures could contribute to a common content—a commonality of approach—for language educators, something that has been elusive to our profession but could be very valuable.”

The first of the two Standards (4.1) focuses on “the impact that learning the linguistic elements in the new language has on students’ ability to examine their own language, and to develop hypotheses about the structure and use of languages,” according to the Standards document. It suggests that, “activities can be systematically integrated into instruction that will assist students in understanding how languages work.”

The document says about Standard 4.2 that “as students expand their knowledge of cultures through language learning, they continually discover perspectives, practices, and products that are similar to and different from those in their own culture. They develop the ability to hypothesize about cultural systems.” It also notes that while “some students may make these comparisons naturally, others learn to do so.” Finally, it suggests that this Standard “helps focus this reflective process for all students by encouraging integration of this process into instruction from the earliest levels of learning.”

Elizabeth Webb, Director of ELL Programs for Gwinnett County (GA) Public Schools, says it is important to realize that these two Standards do not suggest that an educator must be an expert on all languages and cultures. “I think that can be a reason



Comparisons

Develop Insight into the Nature of Language and Culture

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.

that teachers don't dive into the Comparisons Standards more—because they are afraid they're going to be wrong or compare something incorrectly. I think they want to have an open perspective on things and they want to compare, but they don't always feel that they have enough knowledge.”

Relating to Languages and Cultures

“From the earliest language learning experiences,” reads the Standards document, “students can compare and contrast the two languages as different elements are presented.” Most teachers, particularly at the beginning levels, will do just that—explicitly pointing out to their students the similarities and differences between the languages, such as the use of cognates, word order, feminine/masculine word endings, differences in punctuation and capitalization, the use (or lack) of articles, and other grammar points.

Lynne Gant, who teaches Spanish and ESOL at Couch Middle School in Grayson, GA, finds that she must include some explicit comparisons of Spanish and English for her beginning language learners—such as explaining cognates to them—since these brand-new students do not intuitively observe such details about language. “Later, when we're doing an activity, students can discover the cognates on their own. We can stay in the target language and they'll start to pick it up—whether I need to just say it, or to also write it, for them to notice the similarities in the words.”

Gant and other teachers also say that making linguistic comparisons is something that can be done throughout the course. It does not have to be a stand-alone lesson, she says, but also can mean addressing “the simple little things” that come up in class and responding to what the students themselves notice. “You can sometimes do this in a matter of minutes and then just continue to model it over and over again for your students.”

Webb agrees that it is often necessary for teachers to highlight things such as word order or masculine/feminine pronouns, but she believes that it is also important to think about how to go beyond those obvious comparisons to embrace a bigger view.

“Teachers can be more holistic in making comparisons of language,” she says. For example, if a German class is studying poetry and looking at poems from Goethe, they may also then want to look at other poets who have written about experiences in nature in English, such as Thoreau or Whitman.

“Your students can get a sense of what different cultures do with the language, such as a German writer trying to create the sense of the forest through the actual sounds of the German language. Then, you can say, ‘Now, let's listen to how the sounds of words in English do something similar.’ Then we can develop an appreciation of how sound influences sense in different cultures and languages,” says Webb.

“If you have students coming from additional cultures and languages, you can even ask them: ‘Do you know of a poem like this in your home language? Could you talk to your parents about one?’ If they can bring something in, just to have the experience of listening to the text and maybe have the student talk about the text, you can help them discover what this might tell us about different feelings toward nature, either celebration or feelings of discomfort among different cultures.” In this way, comparisons of language lead logically to comparisons of cultures, as students explore the perspectives behind the different poetic language styles. Therefore, Webb says, comparing languages does not only have to be about comparing the linguistic details, but can be approached

in terms of the product itself—such as the style of poetry.

Furthermore, teachers benefit from broadening their concept of the Comparisons Standards beyond just comparing two languages/cultures in a dualistic nature, according to Webb. “Let's say I'm studying French, English is my native language, and now I want to compare those two. Right there, we are using a very Western cultural concept of comparing just two things, A and B. It can very easily be seen as comparing the ‘standard’ to the ‘nonstandard’ or the ‘primary’ to the ‘secondary’—rather than looking at things of equal value. It doesn't leave a lot of room for nuance within different cultures where the target language is spoken if we simply think it is this way or that way.”

An alternative approach, then, is to make comparisons across a continuum of many cultures and even many different languages. “We can look at Comparisons not just as two-dimensional, but as multi-dimensional,” says Webb. This can include comparing the many different cultures where the target language is spoken with the students' own culture, or can mean bringing in other languages and cultures (perhaps ones that your students are familiar with directly through their own backgrounds) to add this additional dimension.

Gilberte Furstenberg, creator of the *Cultura* project at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology [see sidebar on p. 35] has seen that when students interact with others from the target culture, the language itself can become a cultural object. In these web-based interactions, American students are writing in English about cultural issues and French students are writing in French. [Note: This design is deliberate, as they have found that these intermediate students need to express complex views about their own culture in their native language when interacting with the students online, but the actual discussion in class is conducted in the target language.]

“When we have compared the way the students write to one another about their ideas about culture, it is completely different. The American students tend to express their opinions with ‘I think this . . .’ or ‘I feel this . . .’ In other words, they use themselves as the reference point. The French, on the

other hand, don't tend to use the word 'I' to express their ideas; they speak much more from the abstract and keep themselves outside the discourse. This difference in language use, then, reveals a deeper cultural perspective is present."

Furstenberg has also noticed that her students' writing in the target language improves significantly from the interaction with the French students. "Their language skills are enriched by the comments they read by the other students in the target language," she says. "I find my students start to mimic the authentic style of the French writers and their vocabulary increases enormously."

Going Further with Cultures

Making cultural comparisons goes beyond sketching out quick Venn diagrams or breezing through a discussion of holiday traditions. Although these might be minor aspects of what a teacher does with culture, it is crucial to do more than just superficial activities in order to avoid creating or reinforcing stereotypes.

"You want to have a lesson that is really in-depth enough for students to understand the underlying perspective that is present," says Gant. "If the lesson is too brief and you are just sort of glossing over the cultural aspect for whatever it looks like on the surface, then you will just be creating stereotypes. They'll think, 'Oh, that's strange or weird!' instead of having respect for what is different and understanding why it is different. That's always the key question I try to focus on: 'Why? Why do they do this? And why do we do it differently?'"

To compare successfully, says Gant, "you have to be sure the students look at their own cultural perspective first and identify that. If you can get them to do that and spend enough time on it, it really does make a difference in their understanding."

"The thing is, you have always to have an anchor piece in the home culture and the home language," says Schulz. "I feel quite strongly about that—because people don't even agree on their own culture. When you bring up a topic, people come up with different interpretations and even different facts."

She says that people may be predisposed in general to stereotypes, so teachers should not be surprised if their students begin there. "You cannot avoid them, but you can make your students see that that's what they are doing," she notes. "Further, if you have enough supporting data for your opinions, then you can state a generalization as a guarded generalization—i.e., 'Germans tend to be more xyz than Americans'—with the caveat that culture varies depending on age, region, gender, religion and so many other factors. In most cases, we will be able to see the diversity and not rely on stereotyping. But, again, insisting on data helps deconstruct many stereotypes."

Van Houten feels that it is necessary for teachers to model for their students a positive approach to the target language and culture—"positive in the sense of being open to listen to students, but always speaking in a tolerant, appreciative tone so that students begin to take that same approach to the culture." She also says that sometimes a subtle approach can work better than making an explicit comparison to help keep your students from slipping into a negative, biased approach (i.e., thinking: "We don't do it that way in our culture, so this other culture must be weird or wrong.") She points to Jean Amick, a French teacher currently at Kentucky Country Day School in Louisville, KY, who has set up her entire curriculum around comparisons with the target cultures.

"This concept is to involve the students vicariously in the lives of people from all over the world who speak the target language," says Amick, who has taught using this approach at the middle school, high school, and university level in both French and Spanish. "As beginning language students, they may not be aware of the breadth of people and cultures that share a common language."

The first day in Amick's class, students work on brainstorming ideas that come to mind when they hear "French/France" or "Spanish/Spain/Mexico," building a list on the board. Then she asks them to design a binder cover that expresses their responses and thoughts to these words. The following day, everyone must draw the name of a target-language country out of a hat.

"This country will become their new identity for the rest of the year," says Amick. Each student will become the classroom expert for their adopted country and every time a topic is addressed in the classroom (e.g., where we live, numbers to compare countries and data, weather, time zones, student life, sports, housing, holidays, music), the students must research how that relates to their chosen country. Amick ends with two key questions: "What is going on in my target country today? What does the world look like to me now?"

According to Van Houten, the Kentucky Department of Education was so impressed with Amick's approach that they have presented it as an exemplary curriculum on their website. "Throughout the year, the students develop a specific personality with a sympathetic perspective towards their country. And, as they are constantly comparing their own countries with the others in class, they are really developing a more global mindset overall," she says.

Collaboration and Critical Thinking

"These are not Standards that are looking to define absolute knowledge or come out with exact dates; that's not the kind of knowledge we're trying to get here. We are trying to get a really rigorous understanding about different cultural perspectives and different things people may do with language," says Webb. "If we approach this by utilizing others' knowledge of the language and culture as well as our own, we may be more willing to explore and not present things as black and white."

Educators may benefit from collaborating with other colleagues in order to better make comparisons among languages and cultures. Working together with others in your school or department on special projects can allow you to understand more about what they may be experts on, and to share your own expertise with them. Or teachers might consider combining their classes and letting the students share their knowledge of one target language/culture with those who have studied a different one.

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Cultura: Comparisons as the Focus of Language Learning

While some language educators out there may be struggling with how to incorporate the Comparisons Standards into their language classes, others have embraced a course curriculum that makes this the primary focus.

Developed in 1997 by a team in the French section at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), *Cultura* is a web-based intercultural project situated in a language class, connecting American students with students in different countries. *Cultura* continues to be taught at MIT as a complete course and it has since been adapted to other schools and languages, connecting students in the United States with students in France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Russia, and Spain—even connecting some students outside the United States with one another in two languages other than English.

Cultura is not the only project of its kind, but it is particularly well-known for its pedagogically sound design, approach, and methodology, allowing students from different cultures to gradually construct together, via a common website and a computer-mediated exchange, a deeper understanding of one another's cultural attitudes, beliefs, and values.

According to Professor Emerita Gilberte Furstenberg, one of the primary creators of the course, *Cultura* came about after she gave one of her classes the assignment to compare a French film (*3 hommes et un couffin*) with its American remake (“Three Men and a Baby”). Although the two films were almost shot-by-shot the same, with the same plot, characters and dialogue, her students were still able to see clearly many aspects that were changed to adapt French culture for an American audience. “These wonderful discussions came out of the exercise,” says Furstenberg.

Because this happened right at the advent of the Internet and the emergence of online communication tools, it occurred to her that it would be even more interesting not just to have the American students talk about the cultural differences but to also discuss the same films with French students to hear about it from their perspective.

With funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the project got off the ground first as an exchange between French language students at MIT and English language students at Supaéro in Toulouse, France. Today, there are 40 current exchanges taking place on the *Cultura* website dating back to 2007 in the languages of Bulgarian, Chinese, English, Finnish, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Turkish, which have included both high school and university students. [There are also archived exchanges saved on the website dating back to the project's inception in 1997.] French Professor Sabine Levet currently teaches the course at MIT.

Cultura is based upon a cross-cultural approach where students observe, compare and analyze similar materials from their respective cultures, make observations and draw preliminary hypotheses, and then exchange viewpoints with one another via online forums, so as to test their initial hypotheses and develop a more in-depth understanding of the nature and origin of the differences they have observed.

The materials explored together by the students include:

- Three questionnaires (word associations, sentence completions, and reactions to hypothetical situations) that are designed to highlight cultural differences pertaining to the concepts and modes of interactions between people in a variety of contexts.

- Data, which allows students to weight and evaluate their initial findings against a national and broader sociocultural context
- Films, specifically comparing originals with remakes
- Images uploaded by students to illustrate topics of their choosing, which they then compare and analyze
- Newsstand, representing a variety of French and American newspapers and magazines
- Library, meaning a variety of seminal and founding texts from both countries as well as literary, historical, sociological and philosophical excerpts from works by American authors about France and French authors about the United States.
- Archives: These include the questionnaire responses and related forums from previous exchanges

“The students obviously learn an enormous amount and become amazingly aware about a lot of other things in the culture through this process,” says Furstenberg. “They get what I call an ‘insider’s view’ by talking and writing with students in the other culture. It’s a very authentic view of the language and culture.”

One example she gives is the simple association that the students might have with a word like “suburb” (*banlieue*). “The social reality behind these words might be completely different,” she says. “We find the American students often associate this with *family, picket fence, quiet, houses*, but the French will say *danger, zoning, crime*. If you look in the dictionary, you’ll see one is the translation for the other, but the cultural comparisons get us more to the reality behind those words and a deeper understanding of the language.” Other interesting discussions come from unpacking the meaning of words like *individualism* in both cultures, or even examining what each culture perceives when someone names an object a *coffee cup*.

She says that what is central in the process is that students are involved in co-constructing the knowledge and understanding of the other culture. “We don’t focus on having the right or wrong answer; it’s about reflection. We don’t want students to come out with a lot of facts about the culture, but instead to understand more about how people can react in this or that situation and why they might react that way.”

The authentic comparisons that arise from this long-term process are recorded in weekly logs by the students, where they have the opportunity to synthesize what they have learned and, as Furstenberg says, “to put the pieces together.” In class, the teacher may lead discussions based on the patterns that students have realized on their own. “It’s the students doing it, the students really clearly see things emerge that are really interesting,” she notes. “But, again, it is the Comparisons that allows these things to emerge.”





1. The National Standards describe Comparisons as:
 - A. Adopting the habits and attitudes of the target culture
 - B. Developing insight into the nature of language and culture through comparisons of the language and culture studied and learners’ own
 - C. Saying how something is the same or different from one’s own language or culture
 - D. Comparing cultural perspectives

2. Which of the following were used in the original Standards document and executive summary to describe teaching the goal of Comparisons?
 - A. This goal area describes the impact that learning the linguistic elements in the new language has on students’ ability to examine English and to develop hypotheses about the structure and use of languages
 - B. The long-term experience of studying another language leads students to discover that other cultures view the world from a perspective different from their own. Students view concepts in a new light as they probe apparently similar concepts in the target culture
 - C. Students learn ways of hypothesizing and making predictions about how language is likely to work in a setting with which they are not familiar. They cease to make naïve assumptions about other languages and cultures solely based upon knowledge of their own
 - D. All of the above

3. Students would demonstrate understanding the nature of language in all of the following ways, **EXCEPT**:
 - A. Using an online translation program to convert their English into the target language
 - B. Analyzing an online translation program’s target language version of an English text and identifying what appropriately matches the target language syntax and what is merely a translation of each word in isolation
 - C. Describing some ways in which word order is different in native and target languages
 - D. Watching a recorded sample of their in-class interpersonal conversation and explaining how their native language surfaces in some of the ways they expressed themselves

4. Students would demonstrate understanding the nature of culture in all of the following ways, **EXCEPT**:
 - A. Identifying some examples of how cultures may have the same functions (e.g., preparing a meal or dating) as in their native culture, but with different outward or visible forms
 - B. Explaining how just translating a target language word into one’s native language may not convey the cultural connotations and implications of using that word
 - C. Hypothesizing why work habits are different in their native culture and the target culture
 - D. Describing how a holiday is celebrated in another country

5. To make a comparison of the cultures studied and one’s own requires:
 - A. Perceiving another culture as superior to one’s own
 - B. Traveling to another country
 - C. Observing and reflecting on what is the same and what is different in cultures without valuing one over the other
 - D. Being an expert on one’s own culture before attempting to understand another culture

6. Effective ways that teachers might highlight comparisons of language include all of the following **EXCEPT**:
 - A. Teach 10 vocabulary words related to a holiday
 - B. Use a timeline to identify how the target language describes action taking place in past, present, and future and ask students to put underneath how English does the same
 - C. Provide two examples of how language can express similar meaning in different ways not just using different words (such as taking or placing blame) and have students brainstorm additional contrasts between target and native languages
 - D. Give students a list of idiomatic expressions from the target language and ask students to provide similar expressions in their native language (if they exist) and share how similar or different the expressions are

7. To effectively highlight comparisons of culture, teachers might have students do the following:
 - A. Identify which menu items are from the target culture
 - B. Given a scenario of a cultural misunderstanding experienced by an American student abroad, research what is causing the misunderstanding
 - C. Watch a movie from the target culture with English subtitles
 - D. Circle on a state map the place names that are from the target language or culture

8. The following statements accurately describe the various ways that students “make” Comparisons, **EXCEPT**:
 - A. Students identify which sports are the most popular in the United States, in the target cultures, and in both
 - B. Students analyze the characteristics and history of different sports to hypothesize why sports have differing degrees of popularity in different cultures
 - C. Students report on their favorite sport
 - D. Students research which sports are most popular among different age groups in the U.S. and in the target cultures

POP QUIZ *Continued*

9. The Comparisons goal, often left out of local curriculum documents, is important for students because:
- A. It is something students can easily memorize for tests
 - B. It teaches students how to think critically
 - C. It encourages students to be independent
 - D. It focuses on real-world activities
10. The best advice for implementing the goal of Comparisons is:
- A. Delay discussion of cultural differences and similarities until students have Advanced-level language to handle the discussion in the target language
 - B. Have students make a comparison of a cultural phenomenon every Friday
 - C. Ask questions on tests in which students have to explain how a grammatical structure occurs in their native language
 - D. Provide activities for students to experience or observe target language and culture and then express the insights gained from comparisons with their native language and culture

Quiz created by ACTFL Director of Education Paul Sandrock

Resources

Communicating Across Borders: Developing Intercultural Competence in German as a Foreign Language, edited by Renate A. Schulz and Erwin Tschirner

Available on the AATG website at
tinyurl.com/communicatingacrossborders

The *Cultura* Community Site
cultura.mit.edu

Jean Amick's Curriculum for "Adopting" a Country
tinyurl.com/amick-kentucky

Schulz, R. A. (2007). The challenge of assessing cultural understanding in the context of foreign language instruction. *Foreign Language Annals*, 40(1), 9–26.

INTEGRATING COMPARISONS

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"We could also equip our teachers better with the knowledge of what cultures tend to be more individualistic and those that are more oriented towards community—or those cultures that are oriented towards products versus cultures that are oriented towards processes. If we would work to understand that level of difference better rather than focusing on superficial things, I think we would be doing our students and ourselves a great service," Webb says.

"The approach of Comparisons—and particularly allowing students to research, and hypothesize about the differences themselves—can get to the critical thinking that we wish to encourage," says Schulz. "Whether or not the students stay with studying the language long-term, the cultural knowledge that they gain both about themselves and others through Comparisons can remain and will help shape their view of the world."

Webb agrees, saying, "Comparisons have a lot of real-world value and will no doubt help improve our students' college and career readiness. When they walk out of our classrooms into the wider world, it is likely that they are walking into a workplace or a college campus that is at least as diverse as their home school—and probably more diverse. If we have helped develop the skills to think and accept and explore other languages and cultures that develop their skills and understanding and friendships, then how much better they are going to be positioned when they are asked to work on an international collaborative team."

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POP QUIZ Answers:

1. B (This is the language of the two Standards under the Comparisons goal.)
2. D
3. A
4. D
5. C (Language learners make more effective comparisons when they develop insights into their own culture and language; however, making comparisons need not be delayed until one is a cultural "expert" on one's own culture. Indeed the act of making comparisons heightens awareness of one's own language and culture.)
6. A
7. B (None of the other examples involves making any cultural comparison.)
8. C
9. B
10. D (No need to delay; students at all levels can observe and express comparisons in the target language given graphic organizers to help them use simple language to express complex thoughts.)