


Standards-based Learning and Teaching: A Crucial Issue in World Education			Linguistics
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Abstract			
<p>Education throughout the world is now focusing on the use of standards-based education. The ways in which standards are being used as the basis for curriculum and accountability systems vary greatly from one country to another. Higher education in Albania is undergoing a variety of changes due to such reform movements. Albanian universities also are transforming their curricula as the result of the Bologna Process, restructuring their four year integrated teacher preparation programs to a three-year B.A. plus a Master of Art’s Program. This article will focus on issues such as what standards are and specifically in education; why we need to change from a course-based system to a standards-based system; and how specifically one university has applied these changes.</p>			

Introduction

What are standards, and how do they differ from a competency or course-based model of education? “Many who are critical of competency-based approaches associate them with a narrow and reductionist view of learning and instruction” (Spector, et al, 2006). For that reason, more than twenty years ago, much of education began moving away from competency-based instruction and moved to a standards-based model. In a standards based model, standards are goals or guidelines, benchmarks to meet; they look at the macro rather than just the micro, a discrete type of learning and evaluation.

The term standard has been defined in many ways. The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2011) defines a standard as a “criterion, gauge, yardstick, something established by authority, custom, or general consent as a model or example.” According to Kay Burke (2011), teacher and student standards “synthesize the body of knowledge that a group of educators agrees is necessary for success in each subject area and at each grade level, “ (p.23). The one given by O’Malley and Valdez-Pierce (1996) also seems to capture the teacher training sense of the term. They define standards as “benchmarks for accountability or goals that students (or teachers) will attain.” This is consistent with the earlier Merriam-Webster’s definition that standards are a criterion or guideline. In other words, as opposed to competency-based models, standards are the overall goal, and meeting them can be determined along a continuum. Usually this continuum is determined by using a rubric of some type.

Standards in Education

Early attempts at systematizing the English teacher preparation programs in countries around the globe were prescriptive and were limited mostly to preparing teachers to teach grammar and reading. This was especially true where few, if any, native English speakers were present (the language proficiency of English teachers and issues related to that will be discussed below). In some countries, training programs merely had a few guidelines for universities preparing teachers to follow. Even when standards (or guidelines) were approved by Ministries of Education, they weren’t necessarily implemented by individual programs. In other cases, teacher preparation programs and their courses were made consistent throughout the country (e.g., Mexico). In still others, universities had autonomy in how they prepared teachers (e.g., Ecuador).

Standards, where they now exist, have served to bring consistency both to how students are taught, and to how teachers who teach them are prepared. Most countries have some kind of criteria for becoming a teacher. These vary greatly, however, from just completing a specialized high school curriculum (e.g. Panama), to three+one years of university study (e.g. Albania). In many countries these criteria are set at the national level, unlike the U.S. where each state has its own criteria for becoming a teacher. Darling-Hammond suggests that unless we move towards keeping more consistent goals, rather than always making exceptions to the goals, our educational reforms “will surely evaporate in a very short time, long before good schooling spreads to the communities where it is currently most notable by its absence” (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p.211). Standards are clearly a way to provide the stability and consistency Darling-Hammond advocates.

The use of standards-based teacher education can help to enhance professionalism in the field of teaching. Through having clearly defined and implemented benchmarks, the quality of teaching and learning can be improved. Standards provide a way to ensure that future teachers are prepared for the classroom. Standards can also be used as guidelines in curriculum development, materials development, syllabus design, assessment and evaluation.

Standards also provide a way to share teacher preparation program goals with colleagues around the world. By comparing and contrasting the American and European experience, for example, countries can expand the way in which they prepare teachers, adapting and adjusting to meet individual country’s needs, such as here in Albania.

However, standards in teaching can’t be implemented without reforming and changing the curricula, without improvement in material development, and without effective guidelines in teaching and learning methodologies. This requires the careful incorporating of standards into syllabi, lesson plans, classroom activities and assessment. Standards provide a useful tool to help student teachers enter the teaching profession confident that they have the knowledge and skills necessary to become a teacher, and a method to monitor their endeavors in teaching. Standards-based education is a way to make change if we want to change, and if change is the goal.

While standards provide the structure and clear goals for teacher preparation programs, they have also been mis-used, becoming mandates instead of guidelines. As adapted from Falk (2000), the following chart shows the possible helpful and harmful use of standards.

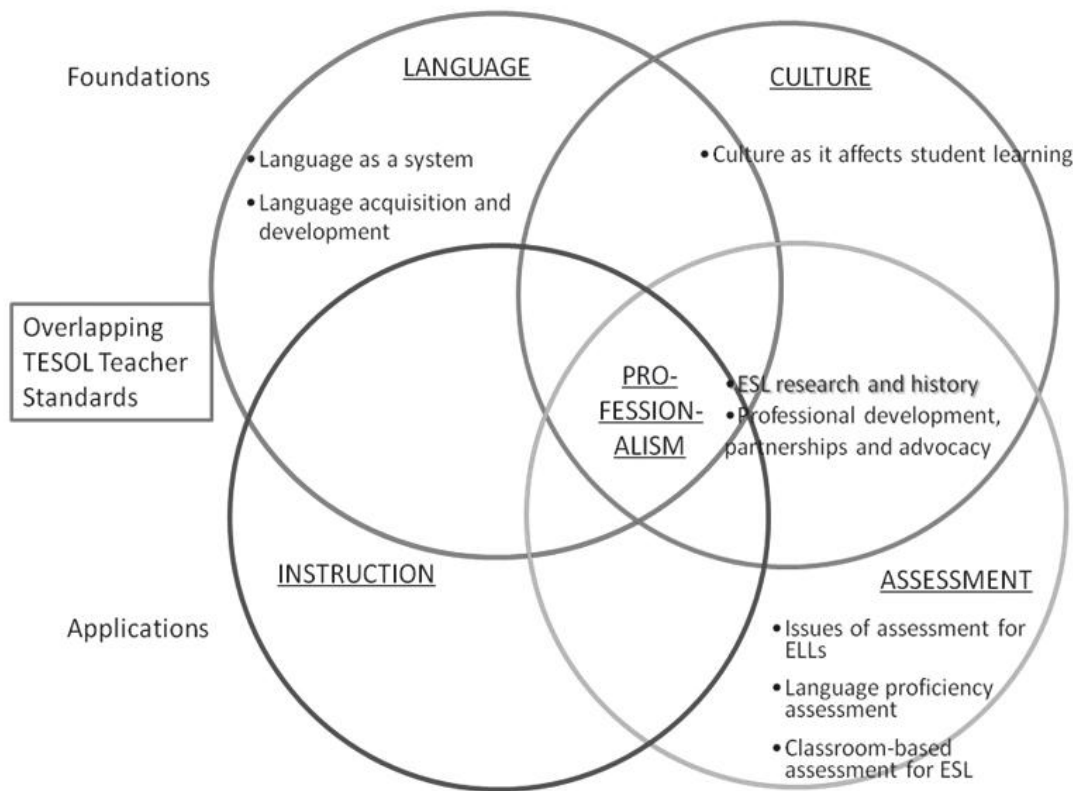
Helpful standards	Harmful standards
... improve the quality of teaching by directing it towards meaningful goals.	... equate <i>harder</i> with <i>better</i> , without changing the quality of how things are taught.
... articulate core ideas and critical skills ... in a way that is meaningful, without being overly prescriptive.	... focus on retention of prescribed, disconnected facts and skills for each discipline.
... serve as a means for educational stakeholders to develop common expectations about what is considered the essentials of learning.	... serve as a means for disciplinary experts to assert the importance of their respective fields, by focusing on detailed aspects, making the standards impossible to achieve.
... are assessed through multiple standards-based performance tasks that show that students are progressing towards important ideas and skills.	... are assessed through multiple-choice, norm-referenced, standardized tests that emphasize skills and facts out of context, in relation to other test-takers.

Source: Falk (2000, p. 101)

TESOL’s p-12 ESL Professional Teacher Standards

English Education throughout the world is now focusing on the use of standards-based learning. Standards-based education applies both to the students in the classroom and to their teachers. The ways in which standards are being used as the basis for curriculum and accountability systems varies greatly from one country to another. Currently, many countries are developing standards for students, student teachers and teachers.

As an example of what one country has done, the International TESOL organization has created eleven standards for the preparation of p-12 ESL teachers in the U.S., (see chart below, 2009). These are used for national recognition within the U.S. They are divided into five domains: Language and Culture (foundation/content domains), Instruction and Assessment (application domains) and Professionalism, which drives all teacher preparation programs. As well, ACTFL (American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages) has created standards for world language learning, both for students and teachers. As well, the TESOL p-12 ESL Professional Teacher Standards have been adapted to meet global needs in such places as Albania, Uruguay and Ecuador. However, when these U.S. based standards are applied to learning English in non-English speaking countries, the fit is not always perfect. For that reason, TESOL is now creating guidelines which may be used for creating teacher standards globally.



(TESOL, 2009)

The Common European Frame of Reference (CEFR)

In addition, the European Union has created a Framework for students in the classroom that focuses on levels of proficiency and competence. They have also provided for teachers a tool created to promote plurilingualism around the world and set language proficiency standards at successive stages of development. Further, it describes the linguistic skills needed by language learners to become competent speakers of another language. These have also been applied to teacher education. The CEFR (2001, pp. 7–8) states that such standards need to be

- open (capable of further extension and refinement),
- dynamic (in continuous evolution in response to experience in use of the language)
- user-friendly (presented in a form that is readily understandable and usable)
- nondogmatic (not irrevocably and exclusively attached to any one of a number of linguistic theories or practices).

These guidelines, while not standards, have been used to promote quality preparation of teachers in many parts of the world.

The Albanian Project

Higher Education in Albania currently is undergoing many changes. Universities throughout the region are in the process of transforming and re-designing their curricula as a result of the Bologna Process¹. The Albanian universities are restructuring their four year integrated English teaching program and B.A. degree into a three-year B.A. plus a two-year Master of Art's Program, which focuses primarily on teacher preparation.

The standards for student teachers describe the knowledge and skills that a beginning teacher must have to meet expectations for quality teaching in the Albanian school system. The standards reflect a strong emphasis on the content and pedagogical skills necessary to serve the needs of the students who intend to be future teachers. Some efforts have been completed in this direction, but they are sporadic. However, the movement for developing and implementing standards in education is gaining momentum in Albania as more emphasis is placed on learner outcomes and professionalism in the field of teaching and learning.

One of the first such projects, began several years ago at the university in Elbasan. The Modern Languages Faculty at Elbasan was in its third year of the new B.A. and they needed to plan and prepare to implement both the revised license year and the M.A. The task was to facilitate this happening. During the first visit by an ESL specialist sponsored by the U.S. State Department, the whole faculty had a general discussion about what the goals for English teachers in Albania were, what standards were, what had existed before, and what the faculty's vision was for what should occur in the future. The meetings were attended by the majority of the English teaching faculty. Some, particularly those who taught the basic linguistic courses, chose not to participate thereafter. The younger faculty was enthusiastic, and spent many hours working to create the standards.

¹ The Bologna Process, begun in 1999, set criteria throughout Europe for how B.A. degrees would be given. See the European Commission on Education and Training website for more information: http://ec.europa.eu/education/higher-education/doc1290_en.htm

It was suggested during these initial meetings that the program move to a standards-based, rather than a course-based system, which was supported by the majority of the faculty and students alike. The idea of having clear expectations, as demonstrated by standards-based models, for both faculty and students was especially well received. However, it took a great deal of discussion for the faculty to fully understand how standards differed from the course-based program they currently had.

Essentially a course-based system has a series of courses that are decided upon either by committee, dean, department chair or some other group. These courses are often autonomous in the sense that there are no apparent connections with other courses. In a standards-based system, there is an overall plan and standards are met across courses, not necessarily just within one course. Assessments for standards-based programs are also created not just within a course, but also across courses, usually using rubrics. This leads to collaboration within the program, rather than “each one for him/herself”. The following chart demonstrates some of the differences between the two types of systems.

Characteristics of a standards-based program	Characteristics of a course-based program
overall plan, macro level, “the big picture”	micro-level, may not see or have connections
standards are developed across different courses, overlapping is expected	each course is autonomous
flexibility in how you “get there,” but could become mandated by education officials if not well planned	usually more autonomy in objectives and syllabi
integrative assessment	individual course assessment
multiple ways of assessing a concept	single assessment of many concepts, accountability at course level

In these meetings, the faculty questioned using a U.S. model since Albania was hoping to join the European Union (they applied in 2009) and also most faculty who had or would travel abroad would go to England rather than the U.S. However other models that were examined didn’t suit their needs, so the TESOL model was adopted.

Changes that needed to be made to adapt the TESOL standards to Albania’s context were first in the domain of culture, since a major issue was to introduce the culture of English dominant countries, these countries’ traditions and life styles to those learning English in Albania. Another adaptation needed was in the area of language proficiency, which will be discussed below. Other areas of the standards helped to reinforce and to enhance what the program already included.

How the project was organized

In order to begin the restructuring process, small focus groups were formed to: 1) discuss what it means to have a standards-based system, 2) introduce the TESOL P-12 ESL Teacher Standards, and also a model from Egypt, 3) discuss the English language proficiency of teacher candidates and how to assess them, and 4) review the current courses and decide what revisions would need to be made.

What also occurred during that first week was that the chairs of the German, Italian and French departments became aware of what the English faculty were doing and spoke to the Dean about their becoming participants in the project.

It was discovered that those instructors teaching courses in, for example, language methods for English, German, Italian and French had never spoken to each other, and had actually never even met. This was true for all the other parallel courses taught in each of those departments. An unexpected by-product of this project, then, was that it allowed the faculty to meet and discuss similarities, new ideas and different ways to prepare foreign language teachers.

Groups were formed by discipline (e.g. methods, language & language acquisition) and TESOL domain (language, culture, instruction, assessment and professionalism) with appropriate faculty from each language department taking part. The assignment for each group was to start adapting and aligning the TESOL standards to their courses.

This plan for future action was begun onsite, and work continued through email after the ESL consultant returned to the US. The goal at that time was for the programs to be standards-aligned by June, 2007 and complete drafts were accomplished by that time. This was a quick-paced agenda, which required the full support from the Rector, Dean and language Department Chairs. Approximately 35 faculty and students participated in the process during that first session.

Progress on the project was also reported to the Director for Higher Education at the Ministry of Education in Tirana and received his strong support for using the Elbasan model as a basis for the other six universities in Albania.

The consultant returned to Elbasan in April, 2007 for three additional weeks. The goal of this second session was

- To complete near final drafts of syllabi and assessments for the teaching license in all four languages
- To use these models to collaborate within the university and with other Albanian Universities

During this second work period in Elbasan, core faculty and students met with the consultant to review draft standards and in course groups to complete syllabi and assessments for the license in all four languages. Meetings were also held with Deans in other areas (e.g., Business), to determine adaptability of a standards-based model to their programs. Finally, a few representatives of other universities came to learn about the model.

Language Proficiency

The final major issue that needed to be decided was about the language proficiency of the future teachers. Since the Bologna Process required a three-year language B.A. before the license year, there was an opportunity to require some kind of language proficiency test in the target language (i.e., English, French, Italian or German) before candidates were admitted to the license year. Those students completing their fourth year (under the old model) had reported in their focus groups about the poor levels of English of many of their peers in the program. They were adamant that some form of language entrance examination be given to licensure students.

The issue they raised was that students in the English B.A., for example, were not necessarily going to be teachers, that perhaps they would be tourist guides, or secretaries in a business that needed someone with some English skills. The 4th year students felt that teachers had to have a much higher level of English so that they could be role models for their students. The majority of faculty agreed.

A variety of possibilities were suggested about how to assess the English of those pursuing a teaching license, including 1:1 interviews using the European Framework of Languages, the Cambridge scales, the final grades received in the B.A. in that language, or a separate language proficiency test. In the end it was determined that no language proficiency test could be given because some authorities would say that a B.A. was sufficient in itself.

Conclusion

Practice teachers while teaching need to know and understand the importance of standards in curricula, syllabi, lesson plans, materials and assessment. Students and student teachers' needs assessments provide essential information about what and how they want to learn; content standards give practice teachers a common framework for what they need to know, and for designing their own teaching. It also provides a framework for describing how their students are learning and progressing in their classes.

The use of standards-based education can help to enhance professionalism in the field of teaching. Through having clearly defined, and applicable standards, the quality of teaching and learning of languages can be improved. Standards-based education also requires that practice teacher and student progress depends to a great extent on professional development. This is not something that can be gained by reading or by trial and error. The Elbasan project clearly reflected the extent to which professional development for all concerned (faculty, future teachers, and their students) is necessary.

Research studies (CAELA, April 2006) have found that teachers' perception of content standards and the professional development provided for them play a strong role in the implementation of standards. This also supports the need for on-going initial and teacher trainings, including workshops, conferences, observation of expert teachers, mentoring, study groups, meetings with other teachers, exchanging ideas, regional seminars and conferences to support the use of standards and understanding the implementation of the European Framework of Reference. And all these should be followed by a formalized certification process.

Finally, using a standards-based curricula is a different way of looking at the world

- It's a way to make change if change is the goal
- It encourages collaboration
- It provides for program accountability and consistency
- It clarifies what students should know and be able to do
- It clarifies expectations and student outcomes

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