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## Student Perceptions Related to the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning

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**Student Perceptions Related to the  
National Standards for Foreign Language Learning  
Technical Report Number 02**

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## Abstract

Individual, structured interviews were conducted with seven college students with a variety of documented disabilities. The objectives of the interviews were to gather student perspectives on elements of the *National Standards for Foreign Language Learning*, including Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. Results of Technical Report 02 indicated that participant responses did not appear to vary based on diagnosed disabilities. Instead individual personalities and majors seemed to influence responses and perceptions. Participants found interpersonal communication to be the most useful means of communication. They also noted the importance of cultures and cultural perceptions as they engaged in L2 study. Most participants found value in connecting the L2 and L2 cultures to the first language and native culture. Several suggestions for instructors to help students use the L2 outside of the classroom were presented, along with the need for instructors to make the studied cultural information relevant to the grammar and vocabulary under review.

## **Student Perceptions Related to the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning**

### Issue

Students with disabilities are no longer an exception on college campuses with approximately 10% of college students nationwide self-disclosing as having a documented disability (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2006). Some students with disabilities experience difficulty with foreign language learning ranging from mild to more severe and related to the functional impact of the disability. Key areas in foreign language learning including auditory processing, working memory, speech articulation, phonological processing, and spelling among others may pose unique challenges for some individuals with disabilities. Their academic success, along with that of other students, prompted an investigation of effective teaching practices. Seven students with documented disabilities were interviewed to gather their perceptions of and experiences with foreign language learning. These students provided information and insights on barriers to learning as well as observations and strategies for more welcoming and inclusive foreign language classrooms. (See Technical Report 01 for related research questions and a summary of findings.) Participants also provided insight into the application of the *National Standards for Foreign Language Learning* in the postsecondary foreign language classroom.

### Research question

1. What are the perceptions of university students with disabilities regarding elements of the ACTFL *National Standards for Foreign Language Learning*?

## Method

Seven college students with diverse cognitive and physical disabilities participated in individual, structured interviews with Project LINC staff. A semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix A) was used to guide each session in line with the overarching research questions. Interview topics for the included areas related to foreign language (L2) learning at the high school and college level. The interview protocol was constructed around the following topics: perceptions of learning L2s, differences between studying L2s in high school and college, classroom atmosphere and community, connection with faculty, group work, and advice for new L2 instructors. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed to facilitate data analysis.

Each student was registered with the Office of Disability Services at Longwood University. Diagnosed disabilities included attention deficit disorder (2), autism spectrum (Asperger's syndrome) (1), cerebral palsy (1), learning disability (4), psychological disability (1), and visual impairment (1). Three students had more than one documented disability diagnosis. Self-reported demographic data was collected on each participant and is reported in Table 1. Students were traditional age (18-22), predominantly Caucasian (86%), and 57% female. Each participant had completed high school L2 requirements and taken between one and six semesters of L2 coursework at Longwood. See Table 1 for more information about participants. See Appendix B for a full description of the data codes and definitions.

## Summary of Findings: *The National Standards for Foreign Language Learning*

Student interviews revealed much insight into the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (ACTFL, 1999) and the postsecondary L2 classroom. In response to the study's research question, data was examined to reveal a general appreciation for the five standards along with some barriers to communication within and beyond the classroom. (See Appendix C for a summary of the five standards for L2 learning.) The areas of investigation are Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities.

### ***Communication***

This category relates to student comments about communication within the classroom. It is organized around the three modes of communication: interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational. To demonstrate the perceived interconnectedness of the modes, one participant said, "The reading comes first, but after the reading, the writing."

*Interpretive.* The interpretive mode of communication involves listening and reading in the L2. It was a topic of much discussion among the participants, particularly related to the amount of the L2 used in the class.

Some student participants had negative feelings about being in an environment in which the instructor only used the L2 from the first day on. One participant said, "I was, as were a lot of students the first day, scared stiff." Another noted the difficulty in understanding the L2 at the beginning of their language study sequence: "If [the language being studied] isn't your first language in the first place, if you don't know vocabulary or something, how are you going to ask? That didn't seem like very logical to me." Further

supporting the general anxiety related to interpreting the L2, one student noted the difference in motivations and how it affects a student's ability to interpret. She said of her brother's experience in language classes, "he's not doing [language study] because he's interested in the language," adding, "He's doing it to satisfy that goal, so don't make his life harder than it is."

The shock of acclimating to an L2 only environment, with minimal recourse to the student's native language, was a common theme among participants: "It can be really difficult to be in a classroom or to go from hearing none of it to hearing it all the time." Some participants would have preferred a more gradual transition into the exclusive use of the L2. Another noted her preference for balance of the first language and L2: "I don't mind like having half and half, but I definitely didn't like the fact it was mostly spoken in Spanish when it was 101, and I didn't really didn't know the language." Another participant, however, found a means to adapt to the L2, despite initial troubles. He said, "It was a little alienating at first, but you kind of get to a point where you sit there, and you listen, and you can actually start hearing what they're saying."

*Interpersonal.* The interpersonal mode of communication involves combining listening and speaking or reading and writing to communicate with another person in a synchronous environment (e.g., face-to-face conversation or instant messaging).

There was less trepidation on the part of students toward this mode with one student opining, "I think we should have more opportunities, I guess, to speak in Spanish. That would make me feel better." Another noted, "You have to speak [the L2] in the classroom pretty much from entering. And that can be hard, but, you know, it's probably better off in the long run to have that interaction right away." Conversely, one student

noted that having long conversations in the target language was difficult, even after more than one semester of study: “I can’t. I’m not that fluent.”

*Presentational.* One-way speaking or writing is the focus of this mode of communication (e.g., in-class presentations or research papers). One participant noted the difference in this mode of communication and the need to think through one’s discourse, saying, “You have to put things together. You have to make it flow. It can’t be a fragment.” Another noted her discomfort presenting to the class: “I didn’t feel comfortable, sounding, mutilating a language when I was trying to speak to them.”

### ***Cultures***

Attitudes toward cultural practices, products and perspectives are the focus of this category. The need to study cultures while studying language was generally understood by participants with one saying, “[Culture] definitely reflects upon the language that the people are speaking.” Another noted, “Whenever you are learning language, you need the culture. It’s part of the history, part of why things are the way they are. Any language, American Sign Language, they have culture, they have history.” Studying language also contributed to another participant’s knowledge base, as evidenced by her statement that “pretty much before [third semester], I kind of categorized most of South America and generalized pretty much all the countries together.” The frequent disconnect between cultural content and the linguistic elements of the textbook chapter was problematic for several participants, with one recommending that instructors “tie it in with the lessons because some of the cultural stuff had nothing to do with what we were learning.” Another reported that comprehending the cultural videos accompanying the textbook



“wasn’t difficult. It wasn’t really interesting or enjoyable to me. It was just part of the class.”

*Products and Practices.* Products are the physical artifacts of a culture, such as a flag, traditional dish, or work of art, whereas practices are the activities carried out by members of the culture, such as holidays, traditional dances, or mealtimes. This category includes both products and practices since it was difficult to differentiate between the two in participant comments. One participant found it interesting “to watch people from another culture to see how they interact, see what their customs are and things like that.” Additional resources beyond the book were thought to be beneficial, with one participant saying, “I would think a class that may be more . . . cultural related could be taught mostly speaking Spanish, but if they incorporated enough aids, it would help” and another saying, “I think visual representation really helps.”

*Perspectives.* In the context of the *National Standards for Foreign Language Learning*, perspectives are the “whys” of cultures or unwritten rationale for cultural behaviors. Participants were very aware of the importance of this aspect of language study, with one saying, “You gotta be able to put yourself in another person’s shoes” and another noting the importance of understanding “how are they thinking about this?”

Several participants spoke of the change that had taken place in themselves and their families as a result of having studied another culture. “Now in cultures especially, it’s just kind of an interesting window into how the rest of the world is to me,” said one participant. Another stated, “I just think it’s just taught me and my family to be more open. Not that we were racist or anything. It just gave us the opportunity to expand our horizons, I guess.” Another explained a change in her perceptions that took place as a

result of having studied abroad: “I cannot believe we [Americans] have this view on people that are the friendliest. They are the most hospitable people that I have ever met. They were so welcoming.”

Linguistic differences and how they inform cultural perspectives were mentioned in several interviews, with one participant pointing out that “if there are words for other things, not other things, [it] totally controls your viewpoint on things.” Another found that linguistic differences prompted her to think about cultural differences, especially if the “words or phrases or sentences that don’t have a direct translation. So, that forces you to think.”

### ***Connections***

Connections between other content areas (e.g., history, sociology, or American literature) and L2 study, particularly the ability to acquire unique information through the L2, are the focus of this category. One participant said, “In terms of interdisciplinary, I didn’t notice much of that,” but he was the exception among all of the participants. Some indicated a general appreciation of the connections made by studying L2s, with one stating, “I just liked putting those connections together.”

Several participants spoke of connections that they were able to make between other content areas and the L2. One said, “I definitely was able to make connections to my major and feel like it held some relevance.” A different participant told of instructors having explicitly made those connections in the L2 class: “I have had teacher’s reference stuff from history or be like ‘you might have learned this before.’” Suggestions for instructors to make connections with other areas also emerged from the data; for

example, one participant advised “if you can’t connect it in the classroom, like the history part, people are going to... zone out, because it’s just, you know, doesn’t relate. But, if you can tie it in, well then it works.”

Several participants brought up the distinctive viewpoints available only through the L2 and accompanying cultures. One pointed to her experience taking an advanced L2 literature class: “Because it was the literature from that kind of culture, I kind of learned about the culture and at the same time being interested in, you know, learning the language. Really developing understanding...better understanding.” Another pointed to a specific instance in which he made a connection between a general content course and his L2 class, as well as the underlying German culture. He said,

“I’ll read something and I’ll know what it means in German and then I’ll kind of look at something and be like, ‘Oh, that makes more sense.’ And, I did take a World War II class last semester then I was like, ‘Oh yeah, the importance between the German word *Volk* and the German word *Leute*. The difference between the word *a people* in German, basically *nation* and *a group of people*,’ and that kind of enlightened me a little bit.”

Another student said that studying the L2 helped him develop distinctive points of view: “People don’t realize this, but your language actually constricts the way you think. So the way you say something, interaction with others, too you know. ....You gotta be able to put yourself in another person’s shoes.”

### ***Comparisons***

As suggested in the *National Standards*, students should be encouraged to make comparisons between the first language and L2, as well as between the native culture and

the cultures being studied. The inevitability of making comparisons between the languages and cultures was evident in participant comments. Some participants indicated an increased recognition of linguistic diversity and the societal influences upon language. One said, “Just because... we learn one type of Spanish, that’s not necessarily the type that they’re going to use.” Another told of a linguistic and societal conflict that she encountered while studying abroad in Spain: “...the origins and comparisons of language really came up when you had strife between the Basque separatists [and the Spanish government].”

Other linguistic comparisons were evident in the interviews. One participant had the realization that “if there are words for [some] things, not other things, it totally controls your viewpoint on things.” Another mentioned her understanding that it is impossible to make direct translations from one language to the other. Yet another said, “I’ve had a better appreciation of the English grammar, I think, ever since I started taking German.”

Cultural comparisons were a rich area of commentary for participants. Many highlighted the differences across cultures, with one saying, “We are this one way and they are very opposite,” and another saying, “I think if you ever learn about another culture, at least I do this, I sit back and am like, ‘wow, our culture is very different.’” Another indicated the appreciation gained for her own culture as a result of studying another, saying, “their situations are different.” Yet another reported an increased sophistication in her own ways of thinking, saying, “I know when I am taught usually one way, you only see one side; so maybe seeing both sides of a situation’s good.” One participant provided a concrete activity that was carried out in class to encourage

comparisons:

“I know we had to watch movies and compare and contrast cultures. They were more family-oriented and had these sit down meals and were very into their family; whereas I know in our society we’re always... two meals a day to sit down with your family...I know I never had an everyday meal, dinner with the family together. So, it’s different.”

### ***Communities***

This category concerned the use of the target language within and beyond school contexts, as well as language learners becoming life-learners of the target language.

While most participants were able to point to at least one instance of using the L2 beyond the classroom, one participant said, “I’ve never spoken Spanish outside of class. Never.”

The potential of L2 study to be used outside of the classroom was well recognized by nearly all participants, with one pointing to the practicality of studying Spanish: “The reason why I decided Spanish over the other one is that it’s the most practical with the Hispanic population increasing here so rapidly.” Another indicated that during his study abroad experience, he and other students “had to know Spanish to get around.” Some participants enthusiastically described instances in which they used the L2 outside of the classroom. One participant, a Spanish major, stated, “I use it at home,” going on to describe a playful interaction in which she guided her parents into understanding cognates in Spanish. She went on to say, “I use it at home just to have fun with them. It gives me more practice. My dad calls me *chica* and I call him *padre*.” Another indicated that she and her friend frequently speak Spanish around campus, saying “It’s fun.”

Some participants were cognizant of language study's ability to push one's own personal development. One said, "Really, the world's your classroom," as another pointed to her study abroad experience, saying, "Going over there and learning and seeing all these things first hand really broadens your horizons." Yet another spoke of a service learning trip abroad and how "it put things in perspective for me. 'Cause in the classroom, you can mess up as much as you want. But I was so afraid to mess up in Mexico because I didn't want to look bad. I didn't want to insult anyone."

Difficulty of accessing native speakers was listed as an impediment to using the L2 outside of the class. One participant cautioned, "Some people may not know many people who speak fluent Spanish." Another admitted the difficulty, as well as the utility, of practicing outside of class when she said, "I really don't know how this would be done, but it definitely helps to know people who do speak it so that you can get more practical use out of it." Counter to that example, one participant had a friend whose mother is from Peru. That participant was somewhat anxious about using the L2, saying, "Sometimes you get [to speak Spanish] over there, but if you start, her mom gets all excited so usually we tend to stay away from that." One participant suggested that instructors could facilitate student L2 usage outside of class: "Maybe they could plan field trips to restaurants and events that are run by Spanish speaking people."

One student, however, exhibited a real desire to connect to the German-speaking culture as he told of ways he sought out opportunities to use his L2 skills "IMing in German to friends at other colleges. Meeting at the dining hall with international students visiting the local high school. I went to go meet them and sat and talked with them so there was a way to use it outside the class to better my language skills."

## *Conclusions*

Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities were topics of rich discussion among the study participants and served as a useful means of organizing participant comments. Most participants were able to make connections and comparisons between the first language and the L2, as well as between the native and L2 cultures, with several expressing a desire to use the L2 outside of the classroom. While some participants noted the difficulties of interpreting and presenting in the L2, most were able to point to the utility of interpersonal communication activities, both within and outside of the classroom. One student, however, was much less interested and willing to engage in extracurricular L2 communication with others when compared with the other participants. Another participant, while generally interested in L2 communication, discussed her strategies of *avoiding* L2 communication with her friend's mother.

Participants in this study frequently suggested that L2 instructors make L2 culture relevant and connected to course objectives. Most participants expressed an interest in connecting cultural content to the chapters and grammar being studied. Most, with the exception of the two participants mentioned above, were also open to communicating with native speakers outside the classroom, particularly if instructors provide opportunities and guidance.

There were no clear linkages between students' disabilities and their perspectives with regards to the five standards. Instead, there were often common statements across participants, as was the case with the cultural products, practices, and perspectives. The connection between the L2 and the cultures in which they are spoken was evident to

study participants, as were the advantages to speaking the L2 outside of class. As might be anticipated with any other students, individual characteristics, such as personality and major field of study, appeared to influence participant responses.

### **Bibliography**

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. (1999). *Standards for foreign language learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Yonkers, NY: Author.



Table 1: Participant Demographic Information

Total participants = 7

1. Age: 18(1 or 14%)  
19 (1 or 14%)  
20 (1 or 14%)  
21 (2 or 29%)  
22 (2 or 29%)
2. Primary race/ethnicity: 6 White/Caucasian (86%), 1 Korean (14%)
3. Registered with the Disability Services office  
7 Yes (100%)  
0 No
4. Current academic class at Longwood  
2 freshman (29%)  
2 sophomore (28%)  
1 junior (14%)  
2 senior (29%)
5. Major

Computer science (1), Liberal studies/Elementary Education (1), Special Education (1) , Sociology(1), History & Social Studies Education(1), Spanish(1), Physics & Economics (1)

6. In high school:
  - a. Language studied: 5 Spanish (71%), 2 Latin (29%)
  - b. Years of foreign language taken  
2 years (3 or 43%), 3 years (3 or 43%), 4 years (1 or 14%)
  - c. How academically challenging would you say your high school foreign language classes were?  
Not hard at all (0)  
Somewhat challenging (3 or 43%)  
Challenging (4 or 57%)  
Extremely hard (0)
7. At Longwood
  - a. Language studied

Spanish (6 or 86%)    French (0)    German (1 or 14%)

b. Why did you select that particular language?

Usefulness (4 or 57%)  
Quality of instructor (0)  
Friends (1 or 14%)  
Background (2 or 29%)  
Other: I took it in high school  
I love the Spanish language.

Note: some participants provided more than one response

c. Semesters of foreign language taken at Longwood?

1 semester    (2 or 29%)  
2 semesters    (2 or 29%)  
3 semesters    (2 or 29%)  
6 semesters    (1 or 14%)

## Appendix A: Student Interview Protocol

1. Introduction/ Purpose/Icebreakers:  
Tell me about your experience learning Spanish/French/German in high school?
  - How was learning a language different in HS than in college?
  
2. The standards for foreign language learning (5 Cs)
  - A. Communication: Tell me about how you communicate in a L2 class.
    - When is Spanish/French/German used? When can you use English? When can the teacher use English?
    - Is using Spanish/French/German uncomfortable for you and your classmates?
    - What speaking activities are the most challenging? The easiest?
  - B. Cultures : How do you feel about learning about the culture of the countries you are studying?
  - C. Connections: Did your L2 courses in college help you feel connected to other classes and different points of view? How?
  - D. Comparisons : Did your L2 courses in college help you understand more language in general? How? What about culture?
  - E. Communities : Have you ever used your L2 learning skills beyond the school setting? When?
  
3. Classroom atmosphere and connection with faculty: Think about your college professors who were easiest to talk to about accommodations. What are some examples of when you have felt really comfortable with a teacher/instructor/professor?
  - What was the L2 class like that you've felt most comfortable in?
  - What in the L2 physical classroom helps you learn?
    - Technology?
    - Arrangement of classroom?
  - What general or specific changes would you recommend to make L2 courses better?
  
4. Group work, classroom climate and community: What are some positive and negative experiences working in groups in your L2 classes?
  
5. Advice for new L2 instructors: What advice would you give a new foreign language instructor about how to teach L2 well?

## Appendix B: Data Codes and Definitions

### **Speaking the Target Language**

This category relates to comments about students and instructors speaking the target language. Amount of speaking in class, means of eliciting spoken input from students, and amount of target language spoken are components of this category. Differences between use of the target language and English, including when each language was preferred by students, are also part of this category.

### **Group work**

Group work concerns times when participants mentioned working in groups of two or more, both in a positive light and a negative light. It concerns preferences of role within the group, choice of group members, and manners of assessing group work.

### **Study strategies**

Strategies engaged in by students while studying foreign languages is the topic of this category. Both effective and ineffective strategies, as perceived by the participants, are included in this category.

### **Study abroad**

This category included instances in which the participants mentioned study abroad experiences that they or others had engaged in. It also included both positive aspects of study abroad in relation to the acquisition of speaking abilities and knowledge of target language cultures.

### **Culture**

Attitudes toward cultural practices, products and perspectives (as defined by ACTFL, 1999) are the focus of this category. Ways in which participants learn about the target

language cultures, cultural activities carried out in classes, and relevance of cultural topics are addressed in this category. Comparisons between American/Virginian culture and the target language cultures are included.

### **Comparisons**

Comparisons between the language and/or culture studied and their own is the focus of this category (as defined by ACTFL, 1999).

### **Connections**

Connections between other content areas and the target language are the focus of this category, particularly the ability to acquire unique information through the foreign language (as defined by ACTFL, 1999). This category concerns connections between Spanish, French, or German and other classes like history, sociology, or literature in English.

### **Communities**

This category concerns the use of the target language at, within, and beyond school contexts, as well as language learners becoming life-learners of the target language (as defined by ACTFL, 1999). Using the language with friends, family, or the larger community is part of this category. Suggestions for how instructors could encourage use of the target language outside of the class make up much of this category.

### **Classroom environment**

Both positive and negative aspects of classroom environment are part of this category. Class size, physical set-up, student comfort, and use of technology are included.

### **Anxiety and student affect**

Instances in which participants mentioned their own or other students' affect toward foreign language learning, including anxiety, are the centerpiece of this category. Ways in which affect can be positively or negatively changed by the instructor compose this category. Participant feelings toward activities, instructors, other students, and assessment are included.

### **Accommodations**

Accommodations, both at the high school and college levels, inform this category. It includes formal accommodations included in IEPs (in high school) or letters from the Office of Disability Services, as well as informal accommodations provided by instructors but not mandated by other offices. Student and instructor comfort with accommodations compose this category. Accommodations for assessments are of particular import.

### **Advice for students**

This category is made up of suggestions for future students in foreign language classes at Longwood University. Those suggestions included when to take the language classes, with whom to take those classes, and ways to be successful while studying.

### **Placement and dropping class**

Patterns relating to placement are the focus of this category, and dropping language classes make up a large part of this group. The placement test used at freshman orientation, factors affecting placement and course dropping, and decisions to drop are central.

Appendix C: *National Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (ACTFL, 1999)

**Communication:** Communicate in Languages Other Than English

*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.

**Cultures:** Gain Knowledge and Understanding of 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 culture studied.

**Connections:** Connect with Other Disciplines and Acquire Information

*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.

**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.

**Communities:** Participate in Multilingual Communities at Home & 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.