

# The Common Core State Standards and Early Language Learning: *Let's do this!*

By Jessica Haxhi

A group of elementary students sit in front of you, waiting for the opening “good morning” song in the target language. As they stare up at you with those sweet faces, let’s hit the pause button:

These kids are all beautiful and unique. They come from different experiences and with very different skills. Some live in comfort, others in poverty. Some have problems reading, or seeing, or holding a pencil. Some love to participate while others sit shyly on the side. Some have parents who are very involved in school; others have parents who are not. But all of the parents love their children and want them to succeed. And so do you.

Now, all of these children are going to be held to the same standards—very high standards—called the “Common Core State Standards” (CCSS). Most of the United States have agreed to implement these first-ever nationwide standards for English Language Arts and Mathematics. (see <http://www.ascd.org/common-core-state-standards/common-core-state-standards-adoption-map.aspx> for a map of adoption). These standards are designed backwards from the skills and knowledge that students need to be “College and Career Ready” at high school graduation.

Of course, students will be tested on their ability to meet these standards. Depending on the state, your students will take standardized assessments created by either the “SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium” (SBAC) or the “Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers” (PARCC). The tests they are creating are challenging—very challenging. They require the ability to comprehend deeply, to write spontaneously and well, and to make sense of different types of “texts.” Kids

need technology skills just to take the tests, such as dragging and dropping and TYPING quickly.

You can try some of these tests yourself at <http://sbac.portal.airast.org/practice-test/>. You can see what the kids, and their homeroom teachers, are up against. And when you do, I think you may decide that these homeroom teachers can’t do it alone. In order for these beautiful kids to succeed, in order for them to be College and Career Ready, it’s going to take all of us, working together, giving them practice, giving them support. In this article, I’d like to talk about how we can start to do that and how we might be uniquely equipped to do so.

## COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS AND WORLD LANGUAGES

The CCSS delineate standards for English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics in grades K-12. An additional document defines standards for literacy development in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects in grades 6-12. While world languages is not mentioned specifically in any of these documents, I think you’ll find that connecting the ELA document to the way we teach (or could teach) is going to be an exciting and do-able task.

ACTFL has already created documents and resources to assist us in understanding how these documents relate to our national *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (1999, originally 1996). A document referred to as the ACTFL “Crosswalk” shows the alignment of the national Standards for Language Learning with the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (see Resources below). The Common Core ELA document is divided into four skill areas: Reading, Writing, Speaking & Listening, and Language. The ACTFL document shows how these align almost perfectly with

our instruction in the three modes of communication: interpretive (reading and listening skills), interpersonal (speaking and listening skills), and presentational (speaking and writing skills). The notion of “language” as defined in the Common Core is represented in our definitions of the proficiency levels (novice, intermediate, advanced). ACTFL has also offered a series of webinars that introduces the Crosswalk document and helps us to understand implementation of CCSS (see Resources below).

## HEY, WE KNOW ABOUT NATIONWIDE STANDARDS!

We world language teachers already understand the concept of shared, nationwide standards. You may have noticed that CCSS workshops in your school focus on the Common Core “anchor standards”. This is the first time that ELA and math have had nationwide end-of-program standards with backwards-designed K-12 benchmarks that lead up to those final goals. Sound familiar? We’ve had our national Standards for Foreign Language Learning “anchor standards” since 1996! This organizing principle makes perfect sense to us.

You have also probably attended meetings at your school about the “shifts in instruction” that the Common Core will require. Again, we world language teachers have already experienced how standards require us to *shift* our instruction. As we have worked with our Standards over the past 17 years, we have redefined what language learning looks like and how we teach and assess it. Before we talk about the shifts that will accompany the implementation of Common Core, it helps to think about the instructional shifts each of us has made since the rollout of the 5 C’s. Perhaps you share some of these shifts with me:

### Shift 1: 5 C’s Unit Planning

I loved my “fruits” unit in which students would learn 10 fruit names. I used bingo

and flashcards to make sure they knew every word. I gave them a quiz and felt very satisfied that they had learned so much! Then, Carol Ann Dahlberg and Helena Curtain taught us all how to go from these decontextualized vocabulary units to thematic units that pulled together many topics and included functions, such as *expressing dislikes*, *making requests*, etc. Suddenly, *students* were talking! The standards showed us how to incorporate all 5 C's in each unit and now we are teaching far richer units that support regular classroom instruction and develop real-world language skills.

### **Shift 2: A New Definition of Communication:**

Let's face it; we all thought we were teaching kids to communicate until we understood the new definition of the *three modes of communication* in the standards. I'll never forget the first time I heard Paul Sandrock explain that interpersonal communication should be *spontaneous*. We guffawed, "Impossible in the elementary grades!" Now, building students' spontaneous conversational skills is my greatest focus and my biggest challenge – and so effective when it is done right. After all, true conversations in the target culture are spontaneous!

### **Shift 3: High Expectations for Student Engagement**

Before the standards, we were satisfied when students were "passively engaged" in class, listening quietly and not acting up. But the 5 C's don't allow for mere quiet listening; students must be conversing, presenting, contemplating cultures, considering subject area content, making comparisons and interacting with native speakers. If the 5 C's are being done right, our rooms are full of "active engagement" and it's noisy and fun, yet purposeful.

### **Shift 4: High Quality Assessment**

We struggled with notions of assessment around the 5 C's at first. If we have done a connection to math in our unit, should we be giving a math quiz? We went back to the ACTFL Performance Guidelines to figure out what we should assess (communication and the cultural awareness necessary to communicate well). Then, we began to use the contexts offered by culture, connections, comparisons and communities as organizing principles for our units. Our understanding of assessment was further expanded by the ACTFL Integrated Performance Assessments, which showed us how using real-world tasks in all three modes of communication both motivated students and gave us a comprehensive snapshot of

their language development. More recently, as we revisit how to move students up the ACTFL Proficiency Scale within the context of the 5 C's, we see real language learning is messy, full of mistakes, and not always linear. We cannot measure such learning by multiple choice tests, but by performance tasks and rubric feedback.

### **Shift 5: Authentic Materials**

The first materials that I bought years ago were generic, devoid of culture, and meant for the regular classroom (especially those pre-made fruit bingo cards!). As the standards shifted our focus to "realia," we began to search out high quality materials, toys, and texts from the target culture. Now, we have Google images, YouTube, and projectors – not a result of the standards, but still a terrific "shift" in the last 20 years!

As you can see, the shifts that we have made since the Standards for Foreign Language Learning document came out were neither easy nor quick. The field had to take the time to revise established practices and documents and create new definitions and strategies. For all of us, there was a lot of trial and error and plenty of collegial discussions. All of this could not have happened, however, without this common document that outlines the goals of our instruction, for all states and all languages. That commonality is what the ELA and Math people are just beginning to experience now.

## **COMMON CORE ELA STANDARDS – THE SHIFTS**

Imagine if, in 1996, we had anticipated the changes in instruction that would be required in order to implement the national Standards. Certainly, many of the best thinkers in our field did just that and they were the ones who helped us make sense of everything over the years. But, what if the main focus of the roll-out of the standards in 1996 had been to tell us the "shifts" up front? That is how the Common Core State Standards are being presented to teachers today.

The shifts in ELA instruction have been divided into six components (or three, depending on which authors you read). Let's consider the six shifts and how we can support them in WL instruction. (shifts taken from the "EngageNY" website - see Resources below).

### **Shift 1: Balancing Informational and Literary Texts**

*Students read a true balance of informational and literary texts.*

Up until now, ELA instruction has focused more on literary texts, such as novels,

stories, and plays. In order to prepare students for real-world literacy needs, they will now be asked to read much more informational text. This shift aligns perfectly with *our* shift toward the use of more authentic materials for our instruction. We support this shift as we have students' work with menus, posters, advertisements, brochures, charts, graphs, songs, webpage "screenshots," movie tickets, etc. from the target culture.

### **Shift 2: Knowledge in the Disciplines**

*Students build knowledge about the world (domains/content areas) through TEXT rather than the teacher or activities.*

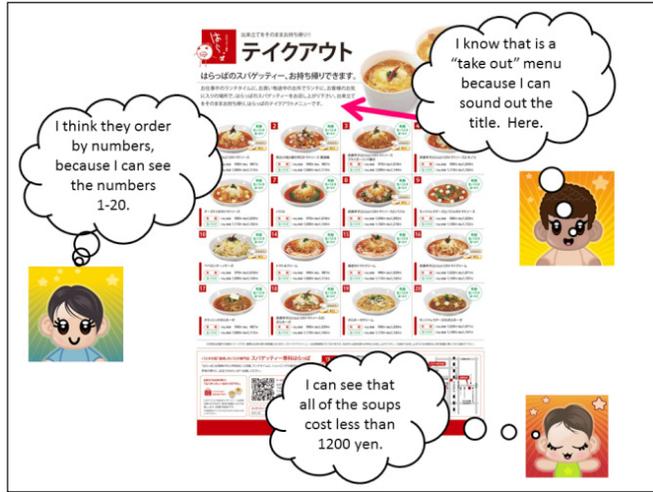
Rather than gaining knowledge merely from textbooks or teacher lecture, students need to learn by their interpretation of texts. "Texts" include realia (yes, objects) and the authentic texts mentioned above. Students can learn about a topic via a short video in the target language, by interacting with toys for a particular celebration, by perusing a website about recycling in a country. The point is that they are not just being told something by a teacher; they are accessing that learning directly.

### **Shift 3: Staircase of Complexity**

*Students read the central, grade appropriate text around which instruction is centered. Teachers are patient and create more time and space and support in the curriculum for close reading.*

In ELA and other subject areas, students have not always been asked to read the complex texts that would prepare them for real-world college and work tasks. This shift requires teachers in all subject areas to consider complexity when choosing texts for students to work with. We can support this shift by giving students experiences with complex texts in the target language (for their level) as early as possible. First graders can look at a movie poster for a popular children's film and find words they recognize, such as dates and times the film is showing. Fourth graders can look at various menus from the target culture, determine what types of restaurant each one comes from, and discuss prices. Sixth graders might read a short non-fiction article about "Coqui" in Puerto Rico and answer comprehension questions about main idea and supporting details. If we consistently expose students to authentic texts from an early age, we can teach them to remain calm when faced with a lot of text, find what they can understand, and use contextual clues. This practice goes to the heart of literacy instruction in any language.

**FIGURE 1**



**Shift 4: Text-based Answers:**

Students engage in rich and rigorous evidence-based conversations about text.

Conversations? We know how to do this. We have always asked students if they like a particular story or how much the hamburgers cost on the Japanese McDonald's menu. In order to get students to a point where they are having "evidence-based" conversations, however, we will have to add some phrases to their repertoire. We will have to teach students how to indicate where they are getting their answers, such as saying "it says it here" or "in the second sentence." That seems like fairly useful language to know, though, doesn't it? After learning such phrases, a fourth grade FLES class might talk about which sentences of a short article talk about the animals found in Costa Rica; a second grade class might point out which words in a poem give clues as to the season the author is describing.

**Shift 5: Writing from Sources Writing**

This emphasizes use of evidence from sources to inform or make an argument.

For literacy instruction, this represents a move away from opinion-based persuasive writing to evidence-based argument writing. We can support this shift by working with students on making references to "texts" (as described above), and helping students to develop debate skills both orally and in writing.

**Shift 6: Academic Vocabulary**

Students constantly build the transferable vocabulary they need to access grade level complex texts. This can be done effectively by spiraling like content in increasingly complex texts. The same holds true when reading world language texts. We can also borrow instructional strategies from ELA such as "close reading." We can teach strategies to guess word meanings from context and apply pre-

viously learned vocabulary to new situations. As we deliver strategy instruction, students will develop both vocabulary in the target language and the "academic vocabulary" of our discipline.

are a team player. Go to homeroom teachers or literacy coaches and ask their advice on various literacy-based instruction that you are doing. Use the same graphic organizers that they use in the ELA classrooms. Post non-fiction articles and texts that you are working on in your classes on the wall outside your room. Create a bulletin board, such as the one in Figure 1, with pictures of students that shows how they are learning to find meaning from context.

**IN CONCLUSION**

The Common Core States Standards are here to stay – for awhile at least. From our own experiences, we are uniquely prepared to understand the concept of instructional shifts; perhaps we can even reassure our ELA colleagues that the benefits of national standards far outweigh the challenges. Luckily, we can support the ELA shifts by making changes that align well with quality world language instruction. Now, we just have to show our stakeholders that once again, world language instruction is a "core" subject. Let's do this!

**RESOURCES**

- Start at the main website at <http://www.corestandards.org/>
- Download the Common Core App to your device! More information at <http://www.masteryconnect.com/learn-more/goodies.html>
- Download the ACTFL "Crosswalk" showing alignment between the national Standards for Foreign Language Learning and the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts document. <http://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/CrosswalkFinalAligningCCSS-LanguageStandards.pdf>
- Go to Paul Sandrock's ACTFL presentation on "Common Core Standards through World Languages: Developing Literacy through Language Learning" for more information about the ACTFL Crosswalk with CCSS and specific examples of how CCSS might look in

the world languages classroom (from Laura Terrill). (<http://tinyurl.com/mk55u4e>) Find the archived ACTFL Webinars (Fall 2012) on CCSS at [https://live.blueskybroadcast.com/bsb/client/CL\\_DEFAULT.asp?Client=562094&PCAT=4798&CAT=4798](https://live.blueskybroadcast.com/bsb/client/CL_DEFAULT.asp?Client=562094&PCAT=4798&CAT=4798).

A table of the SIX shifts for ELA and Math can be found at <http://www.engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/common-core-shifts.pdf>

Your school may talk about THREE shifts. These can be found at <http://www.achievethecore.org/page/277/the-common-core-shifts-at-a-glance>

To learn more about academic vocabulary, see Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards, specifically pages 32-33. Available at [http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix\\_A.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf)

**ADDITIONAL REFERENCES**

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