What Can We Learn from the Common Core Standards in the Early Language Learning Classroom?

by Helena Curtain

INTRODUCTION

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the National Standards for Foreign Language Education have several areas of commonality. First of all, both standards have the goal that all students, by the end of 12th grade, will have the skills they need to be successful world citizens. The introduction to the Common Core document spells out the thinking behind it and shows the immediate connection to world languages.

“We are living in a world without borders. To meet the realities of the 21st century global economy and maintain America’s competitive edge into the future, we need students who are prepared to compete, not only with their American peers, but with students from all across the globe for the jobs of tomorrow.” (Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education, 2008, p. 1)

Secondly, the CCSS and the National Standards for Foreign Language Education contain similar strands. The Common Core document organizes the strands according to Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening. These same four strands are found in the National Standards for Learning Languages document in the Communication standard which lists three types of communication ability:

• Interpersonal communication—listening, reading or viewing
• Informational communication which mainly focuses on listening and speaking (but could include reading and writing depending on the nature of the spontaneous communication task)
• Presentational communication—speaking or writing

The CCSS align outcomes with various grade levels while the National Standards for Learning Languages align outcomes with various proficiency levels. In short, as language educators we are strongly connected to the CCSS since we share the goal of preparing all of our students to be world ready with the high levels of proficiency and skills that they need in order to be successful.

As we look at how the Common Core State Standards interact with students in K-5 language programs, we must take into account the disparity in proficiency levels since the CCSS are designed for native speakers of English who are functioning at much higher levels. Proficiency of students in world language classes varies according to the length of time that they have been learning the language, and the types of activities in which they have been engaged. Students in K-5 programs, beginning in kindergarten or first grade, that meet at least three times per week for at least 30 minutes, at a minimum, reach the Novice High proficiency level by the end of fifth grade. According to ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, here is what students at this level are able to do:

Novice-level speakers can communicate short messages on highly predictable, everyday topics that affect them directly. They do so primarily through the use of isolated words and phrases that have been encountered, memorized, and recalled. Novice-level speakers may be difficult to understand even by the most sympathetic interlocutors accustomed to non-native speech. (ACTFL, 2012, p.9)

Even though students in world language classes are operating at much lower proficiency levels, they are still able to work toward the same academic goals. The CCSS demand that all students have an engaging, meaningful, and challenging learning experience. We must work to ensure that all learners in world language classes have the same types of experiences. Students at the novice proficiency range are able to benefit from cognitively engaging activities that demand higher order thinking.

THE COMMON CORE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS

The Common Core English Language Arts Standards describe what students by the end of Grade 12 should look like:

“They demonstrate independence. Students can, without significant scaffolding, comprehend and evaluate complex texts across a range of types and disciplines, and they can construct effective arguments and convey intricate or multifaceted information. Students adapt their communication in relation to audience, task, purpose, and discipline. Likewise, students are able independently to discern a speaker’s key points, request clarification, and ask relevant questions. Without prompting, they demonstrate command of standard English and acquire and use a wide-ranging vocabulary. More broadly, they become self-directed learners, effectively seeking out and using resources to assist them, including teachers, peers, and print and digital reference materials.” (2010, p. 7)

Just as the National Standards for Language Learning challenge our profession to focus on what students are able to do with the language rather than what they know about the vocabulary and grammar of the language, the CCSS present challenges to the way that literacy in English has traditionally been taught in that they focus on moving from a knowledge-driven curriculum to a skills-based curriculum. Billings and Roberts make the transition clear when they say: “The Common Core Standards assume that teachers are ultimately teaching students to think—the most difficult and important literacy skill of all.” (2012, p. 72)

The Common Core standards highlight three key areas of shift: (Alberti, 2012)

• Building knowledge through content-rich non fiction
• Reading and writing grounded in evidence
• Regular practice with complex texts

Teachers are being asked to focus on developing deep comprehension skills in addition to the focus on phonics and other basic skills that had been the hallmark of No Child Left Behind requirements. The new CCSS ask teachers to place greater emphasis on rich and varied texts so that students can be engaged in reading and learning at the same time. Listed below are the ten anchor standards for reading. These anchor standards have been aligned with the National Standards for Learning Languages in a document entitled Alignment of the National Standards for Learning Languages with the CCSS. (ACTFL, 2012). http://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/pdf/Aligning_CCSS_Language_Standards_v06.pdf

COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS ANCHOR STANDARDS FOR READING

Key ideas and details:
1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize key supporting details and ideas.
3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Craft and structure:
A. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyzing how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
B. Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and
The literacy skills that are found in the common core are the same skills that un- derlie the 10 Common Core Reading An- alyzing and Interpreting Standards: Those skills are:

Decoding:
• sounding out the word
• recognizing a sight word

Processing Text:
• directionality of text (not always left to right, in English)
• capitalizing at the start of a sentence
• skimming, scanning, and using other previewing techniques
• using context clues and illustrations to un- derstand a passage

Comprehending:
• identifying the main idea and import- ant details
• predicting outcomes/anticipating events
• identifying story sequence
• summarizing and paraphrasing

Critically Reading:
• discriminating between fact and opinion
• recognizing cause and effect

Studying and Analyzing Literature:
• recognizing important feelings and mo- tivations of characters
• identifying the conflict

Connecting to Early Language Learning?
The second shift emphasizes develop- ment of the three key areas of shift that were mentioned earlier: 1) Build- ing knowledge through content-rich non-fiction, 2) Reading and writing grounded in evidence, and 3) Regular practice with com- plex texts and academic language.

These three shifts are exemplified by the three questions in the Fulton-Archer (2012) article:
1. What do students read?
2. What do they do with what they read?
3. How will we know what they learned?
We will examine each area and how it supports students’ abilities to critically analyze and make sense of the language itself, they are building knowledge through content-rich activi- ties. One way to ensure that our activities are content-rich is to organize our instruc- tion around thematic units. As we plan the- matic units, we need to think about the activ- ities that might otherwise be overlooked and provides a rich source of ideas for the unit. Of course, webbing around subject content topics also provides valuable links to the regular curriculum and supports content-re- lated instruction.
Thematic units are an engaging way to organize instruction around the language. By their very nature, thematic units build the types of skills that are mandated in the Common Core State Standards. Here, according to Curtian and Dahlberg (2010), are some of the reasons why thematic units make a di- rect connection to the Common Core:
1. Students must have a more comprehensible because the theme creates a meaningful context.
2. Thematic planning changes the chan- nels and modalities students can use to the language of achievement to meaningful goals. In thematic instruction, we focus on using the language of content rather than repeat- ing words in isolation with no connection to the classroom or the student. There is a reason why children are constantly speaking to each other and the whole.
3. Thematic instruction involves the stu- dents in real language use in a variety of situ- ations, modes, and text types. Thematic instruction gives students the opportunity to use language in a variety of situations in- cluding simulations of cultural experiences. A theme lends itself to all of these common language modes: interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational. Text types, with a thematic unit, can range from preparing and reading poetry to reading headlines to creating or listening to a description to par- ticipating in a conversation to listening to a play.
4. Thematic instruction involves activi- ties that encourage the learner to use content knowledge in a complex and sophisticated way. If they have the opportunity and the interest. An en- gaging theme built around endangered ani- mals, for example, led one student to use simple vocabulary to make a very sophisti- cated statement. On a picture of a lemon, the student wrote the caption “No way an abrigio” (I am not a coat). This is a far more sophisticated and meaningful use of the verb “to be” than the obvious statement “I am a bat” or “I am a girl.” We are connect- ing to the common core when we ask our students to deal with complex topics even though their language level may be simple.
5. The thematic unit provides many op- portunities for students to hear and use lan- guage in a variety of meaningful contexts. We have had brain research that shows that manipulation of vocabulary and grammar in a drill setting is less efficient than the mean- ingful use of language in rich contexts. Stu- dents need contexts for extended listening, for conversations in which real information is exchanged, and for oral and writ- ten presentations of information and ideas. Fragmented language is not as memorable as language learned in context—and it cer- tainly isn’t as useful.

Second Shift: Reading and writing grounded in evidence:

Questions: What do they do with what they read?

The second shift emphasizes develop- ing students’ abilities to critically analyze both informational and literary texts at in- creasing levels of complexity. This requires reading and writing to be grounded in using evidence from texts. The Common Core State Standards ask students to carefully an- alyze and prioritize information from texts rather than simply answer questions from the perspective of their prior knowledge or experience. They also focus on evidence rather than student experience and opinion underlying speaking and writing. (Alberr, p. 25)

Connections with Early Language Learning Programs
Cullens, Ehrenworth & Lehman (2012, p. 9) indicate that the Common Core State Standards emphasize much higher-level comprehension skills than previous stan- dards. They state that many classrooms have coasted on low-level reading skills and quickly need to “get on board” with high- level reading skills. In light of the increased complexity and the increased results that are being asked of literacy skills in the first languages, it is important that we too
The standards emphasize developing students’ abilities to analyze both informational and literary texts at increasing levels of proficiency. Most educators are familiar with Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy. The taxonomy was based on the idea that learning can be divided into six levels: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Teachers can use these questions as they work from high, clear, and focused expectations. We have examined the connection between the National Standards for Learning Languages and the Common Core State Standards. We have seen that there is overlap between the two standards in that the strands of both are related to listening, speaking, reading, and writing at various levels of proficiency. We have looked, in a very general way, at the learning demands outlined by the new standards. We have also seen several examples of how teachers of young learners can support the demands of the Common Core State Standards, and in doing so, increase the skills of their language learners. If we are to truly produce students with 21st century world-ready proficiency, we must be sure to challenge them with intrinsically interesting, cognitively engaging activities that are connected to global cultures. We must continue to strive to provide students with activities that will not only increase their language skills, but will also provide them with opportunities for complex learning.

Appendix Questions To Consider As We Examine Our Lessons To See If They Are Connecting To The Expectations Of The Common Core State Standards:

- Are we working from high, clear, and focused expectations?
- How can we build proficiency and carefully connect to what the students want to do and say as a result of the text or the activity that we are using?
- Are the materials we are using contributing, not only to proficiency, but also to knowledge and skills from other disciplines?
- Are our lessons and units deep and rich?
- Are we working, not only on our students’ language skills, but also on their thinking skills?
- Are we creating units of study with enduring understandings and essential questions that are interesting and engaging to students?
- Are we organizing our instruction around themes that offer the possibility of cultural and curricular skill-building connections?
- Are we demanding language chunks and language connectors from our students so that they are building a foundation that will easily enable them to move from one proficiency level to another?
FIGURE 1: THINKING SKILLS AND ACTIVITIES IN BLOOM’S REVISED TAXONOMY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SKILL</th>
<th>SAMPLE PRODUCTS</th>
<th>PURPOSE</th>
<th>QUESTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creating</td>
<td>Design, construct, plan, produce</td>
<td>Combine elements into a new pattern or product.</td>
<td>What ideas could you predict or infer from…? How would you create a new…? What might happen if you combined… with…? What solutions would you suggest for…?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluating</td>
<td>Check, critique, judge, hypothet-</td>
<td>Judge or decide according to a set of criteria</td>
<td>Do you agree…? What do you think about…? What is the most important…? Prioritize… How would you decide about…? What criteria would you use to assess…?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyzing</td>
<td>Compare, organize, cite differ-</td>
<td>Break down or examine information.</td>
<td>What are the parts or features of…? Classify… according to… How does… compare/contrast with…? What evidence can you list for…? How… is an example of…? Why… is significant?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applying</td>
<td>Implement, carry out, use, apply, show, solve</td>
<td>Apply knowledge to new situations.</td>
<td>How… is related to…? Why… is significant?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Describe, explain, name, esti-</td>
<td>Understand and interpret meaning.</td>
<td>Retell… in your own words. What is the main idea of…?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remembering</td>
<td>Recognize, list, describe, identify, retrieve</td>
<td>Memorize and recall facts.</td>
<td>Who, what, when, how…? Describe…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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FIGURE 2: CRITICAL THINKING IN PICTURES AND STORYTELLING USING BLOOM’S REVISED TAXONOMY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Little Red Hen</th>
<th>Creating</th>
<th>Evaluating</th>
<th>Analyzing</th>
<th>Applying</th>
<th>Understanding</th>
<th>Remembering</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Create another ending.</td>
<td>Predict what you think would have happened if they all had worked together.</td>
<td>Compare the animals in the story.</td>
<td>Show with actions what Little Red Hen did with the wheat.</td>
<td>Explain why the others wouldn’t help Little Red Hen.</td>
<td>List all the animals in the story.</td>
<td>Retell… in your own words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldilocks and the Three Bears</td>
<td>Create a different story called Goldilocks was bad or good and tell why.</td>
<td>Compare the story to real life.</td>
<td>What could not have happened!</td>
<td>Demonstrate what Goldilocks would use if she came into your house.</td>
<td>Explain why Goldilocks liked Baby Bear’s chair.</td>
<td>Recall the items used by Goldilocks when she was in the bear’s house.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little Red Riding Hood</td>
<td>Create a new version of the story. Change the time from Monday.</td>
<td>Rank characters from best to worst, smartest to least smart, and most to least important.</td>
<td>Group the characters using according to good-bad, major-minor, wise-foolish.</td>
<td>Illustrate the main idea of the story.</td>
<td>Describe and sequence the main events of the story.</td>
<td>Draw the characters from the story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Little Pigs</td>
<td>Prepare a new ending to the story “Three Little Pigs.”</td>
<td>Choose the smartest pig. List three reasons why you chose that pig.</td>
<td>Classify the pigs’ houses from best to worst according to cost, building time and strength.</td>
<td>Use model to demonstrate which house stood up the best.</td>
<td>Describe what each of pig’s houses looks like.</td>
<td>Read the story and name all of the characters.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

REFERENCES


RESOURCES


Common Core State Standards Initiative http://www.corestandards.org


Helena Curtain, Ph.D. is an internationally known expert on second language teaching methodology, curriculum development, and bilateral immersion education. Her special interest is in teaching language to young learners. She is the co-author of Languages and Children: Making the Match. now in its fourth edition—a book used in universities throughout the United States and abroad who teaches language teachers to work in grades K-6. Dr. Curtain directed the English as a Second Language and World Language teacher preparation programs at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee for 10 years. Previously she coordinated the foreign language and ESL programs in grades K-12 in the Milwaukee Public Schools and taught at the elementary, middle school and high school levels. In the Milwaukee Public Schools she started three full immersion programs in German, Spanish and French and was one of the pioneers of the immersion movement in the United States. She has won several national awards including the Two Way Immersion CABE Research on Biliteracy Award in 2010. She has broad experience working with schools and school districts, teaching and conducting workshops throughout the United States and internationally in 50 countries.

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