The functional level of proficiency of a program’s graduates is very dependent on the department’s efforts to coordinate and standardize practices to meet set goals.

W e’ve all been there—we meet someone for the first time, talk turns to work and language teaching, and your new acquaintance declares: “I took (insert number) years of (insert language) in high school and I can’t speak a word now!”

Language teaching theory, practice, and availability of resources have evolved considerably over recent decades. Most students today are having very different language learning experiences than their parents did. However, the reality remains that the functional level of proficiency of a program’s graduates is very dependent on the department’s efforts to coordinate and standardize practices to meet set goals. How well the language department faculty work together to align expectations, focus on proficiency, and increase standards will determine its ability to create and attain goals for student performance.

The availability of resources to guide instructional practice is facilitated by the Internet, as well as a variety of language-specific professional development opportunities at the state, regional, and national level. It is our professional responsibility to be aware of the newest resources, technologies, and teaching tools. A necessary starting point for any department is arriving at a collective understanding of what proficiency means and what the nationally accepted delineation of proficiency levels represents. This can happen with a departmental overview and review of ACTFL’s 2012 republication of the Proficiency Guidelines, which is accompanied online by speech and writing samples of the various levels.

The department is then able to work together to develop the goal proficiency levels for the various levels of programming as well as for their program completers. The national trend is to organize departmental goals around proficiency attained as opposed to seat time. A companion document to the Proficiency Guidelines, the ACTFL Performance Descriptors for Language Learners, also newly updated in 2012, is an invaluable resource to describe language performance that is targeted to instructional settings. There are a variety of proficiency tests available (e.g., AAPPL, OPI, OPIc, and others) that can be purchased to assess student proficiency. This availability of tests represents a crucial support in our profession in this era of demonstrating evidence of student learning by providing results that are nationally normed and understood.

As a profession, we need to get away from district-determined leveling of students and describe what students can do with the language in practical, communicative terms. What does it mean if the student has completed a certain level of study of a language? What really matters now is how the student can use language within a variety of contexts.

The new NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements (2013) can be used to help a department develop statements about what the student can do with the language at various levels of study to provide programmatic consistency and alignment. These statements have multiple uses. At the class level, when beginning a new unit, students can be introduced to the context by what they will be able to do with the language as a result of unit activities. They can use the can-do statements as a reflective self-assessment as they progress through the material of the unit. The statements can be provided to the administration as a demonstration of the spiraling of instructional objectives in curriculum mapping. At an open house, parents can be informed about what their children will actually be able to do with the language as a result of language study. As the department, the students, the administration and the parents begin to all understand the same “lingo” in terms of departmental goals, which in the end serves as an advocacy tool.

Developing a collective departmental understanding of readily available tools will help educators to be more effective and students to attain set proficiency goals. The more departments explore, review, and implement lingo from national resources, the more we can use our common voice to strengthen our departments. As language from these resources becomes more commonplace in our communities, all stakeholders will be better informed about the expectations in our departments and have a shared understanding of what achievement looks like.
Aligning Expectations and Outcomes

The idea of standardizing teaching and assessment practices and developing common assessments and departmental rubrics may disturb some teachers who feel that creativity and independence is stymied by what may seem like impositions. However, those who are involved in departments that routinely collaborate, standardize, and align agree that the sacrifice in no way limits creativity and ultimately better serves the students.

In the Classical and Modern Languages Department in Wellesley, MA, “the hard work pays off in better and more measurable student performance. The important work of developing and aligning common assessments has largely been led by teacher initiatives and has been part of the department’s work for years,” says Department Chair Tim Eagan. Ultimately, all are served by teachers “who take student achievement and language learning so seriously, and are willing to dedicate their time and energy to be the best professionals they can be,” he says.

For those departments beginning the process, a good starting point is the development of a mission statement or departmental philosophy. Once agreed upon, this can be posted as a reminder to the faculty and as an important advocacy effort for the administration, the students, and community, promoting the departmental commitment to high standards. The next step is a strategic plan, or a determination of goals to guide future planning over a specific period of time, perhaps 5 years. Finally, after the mission and the strategic plan, the curriculum review needs to take place. The curriculum specifies the plan of instruction over the course of the program including content, materials, and assessments. It is important that the departmental team participate in the curriculum writing.

Terry Caccavale, K–12 World Language and Immersion Specialist in the Holliston, MA, Public Schools, meets with her team monthly. “Representatives from each level (one from each language program at each level, including FLES and immersion) participated, and work from these meetings was shared with everyone on our language staff at regularly scheduled curriculum meetings once a month after school. The final product resulted from our working with one collaborative voice as we undertook this task.” [The link to the Holliston World Language Curriculum Review is open to the public: www.holliston.k12.ma.us/curriculum/flcr.htm]

The Glastonbury Foreign Language Department, in Glastonbury, CT, uses the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and the sublevels in order to better align learning goals for the different courses offered. Program Director Rita Oleksak says, “We closely align to the district goals of promoting high achievement, ensuring support, growth, and accountability of all staff and building a 21st century learning community.” The curriculum was developed internally using the backward design model. In this model developed by Wiggins and McTighe (Understanding by Design, 2005), you begin by identifying the desired results: what it is that you want your students to be able to do as a result of language learning. Next, you determine acceptable evidence of this learning, and finally, you plan the learning experiences and instruction. The Spanish, French, Chinese, Russian, Latin, and Greek teachers at Glastonbury meet regularly by language and level, and periodically as elementary or secondary groups or as the whole department (Grades 1–12) to have discussions about curriculum articulation. These discussions pave the way for deeper discussions related to student data collection and analysis, and result in more meaningful instructional decisions. As a result, the department has developed student data files containing departmental assessments as well as results from nationally normed tests such as the AAPPL (taken in eighth grade) and the OPIc and WPT (taken in 12th grade).

In Wellesley, MA, the collaborative work began with common final exams based on proficiency standards and has led to annual meetings in groups to “co-score” final exams with the target of aligning grading expectations and practices. According to Eagan, the work has developed in recent years beyond “simply aligning grading practices.” Learning communities were formed to investigate whether they were teaching certain concepts as effectively as their colleagues, and they began meeting weekly to develop a number of periodic assessments as ways to ensure that teachers and students were focusing on agreed upon “power standards” in each course, had common expectations for student performance, and had a formal forum to share ideas with each other. With the learning communities in place, they were primed to address a Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education mandate for districts to measure student learning and growth. Wellesley language teachers saw this as an opportunity to create pre- and post-interim assessments across languages and across grade levels.

After the hard work of developing common assessments and deciding on a shared rubric, examining student samples is the next step. During this time, department members score student samples and each person communicates how he/she interpreted the rubric. Participating in calibration activities is an invaluable part of the departmental collaborative process. It’s important to dedicate time to ensure consistency in student assessment results, to allow for thoughtful reflection on instruction and curriculum, and to provide meaningful student feedback.

Standardizing teaching and assessment practices opens the door to a better shared understanding about what students know and are able to do with the language at the various levels of study. Follow-up collaboration and dialogue will lead to reflections on pedagogy, best practices, assessment prompts, curriculum, and effective feedback.

Professional Growth Communities

Even departments that collaborate well together can benefit from the input of voices from beyond the department in the form of invited speakers, concurrent reading of the same pedagogical book or article, collective conference attendance, and collaboration with other departments. The departmental professional community can only be enhanced by these outreach efforts and they can lead to greater interaction and advocacy that ultimately impacts programmatic growth. A key way to grow as a department is to continually plug into the new theories and practices available to the profession, allowing the new
Special Focus on Professional Development

ideas, technologies, and resources to revitalize and invigorate the departmental community.

When the Brookline, MA, Public Schools created an elementary program for the entire district in Spanish, Mandarin, and French in 2008, Dawn Carney was brought in as the K–8 World Languages Curriculum Coordinator and given the daunting task of creating an elementary program that articulated with the existing middle and high school programs, complete with new curriculum, teacher training, and supervision. An important part of this process includes developing a departmental community.

“Over the past 6 years, we have been building our professional community first within the district, working with a national level consultant to develop a shared understanding of proficiency and setting ambitious proficiency targets for grades K–12. That initial learning has blossomed into individual extended learning, following blogs of other proficiency-based teachers, and exploring resources in social media and in turn sharing those with colleagues,” reports Carney.

Curriculum has been developed and revised in Brookline for the new elementary programs and to align with the existing middle school programs using ACTFL resources (e.g., proficiency descriptors, *The Keys to Assessing Language Performance* [2010], *Implementing Integrated Performance Assessment* [2013]), to integrate authentic documents and the three modes of communication into assessment and instruction. The K–12 teachers are all involved in sharing effective instructional strategies from workshops and/or classrooms either in person during meetings or via e-mail. The high school and elementary faculty has begun to forward appropriate or interesting professional articles from within and beyond our field (e.g., Marshall Memo, Edweek, ASCD, ACTFL SmartBrief, NNELL newsworthy).

---

**IMPLEMENTING INTEGRATED PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT**

**By Bonnie Adair-Hauck, Eileen W. Glisan, and Francis J. Troyan**

A brand-new publication from ACTFL from well-known and highly respected language education experts Bonnie Adair-Hauck, Eileen W. Glisan, and Francis J. Troyan explores integrated performance assessment (IPA) and its use by language educators.

*Implementing Integrated Performance Assessment* is a follow-up to the ACTFL Integrated Performance Assessment Manual published in 2003. The book provides readers with expanded guidelines for how to design IPA tasks to inform the backward design of a unit. Suggestions on how to provide effective feedback and how to improve learner performance are shared. Also included is a reconceptualized rubric for the Interpretive Mode and the addition of IPA rubrics for Advanced-level language performance.

The book is now available from the ACTFL Online Store at [www.actfl.org/store](http://www.actfl.org/store).

ACTFL member price: $25.95; Non-member price: $29.95
Language teachers can play a key role in building a school’s culture of collaboration through leadership, the cultivation of relationships, and idea-sharing within the school community. Lisa Lilley, International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program Coordinator in Springfield, MO, Public Schools, says: “In my district—and I know we are not alone by any means—world language teachers are regarded as highly innovative because they stay current with methodology and technology that advance student learning. To gain that reputation, we encourage teachers to become actively involved in key school committees.” When language teachers provide their voices and leadership in important issues that have an impact on the entire school, they gain trust and respect of their colleagues and administration, while advocating for their departmental needs.

The presence of language faculty at the table of important discussions related to school-wide initiatives helps with departmental visibility as well as with interdepartmental collaboration. Professional relationships derived from these interactions mean that colleagues in other departments are more likely to accept invitations to stop in to watch a language class activity and discuss it together later.

“We also look for ways to share tech tips and successful strategies with others through school newsletters, informal conversations, or in interdisciplinary unit planning. These are all time-honored strategies for promoting language learning, but they are even more effective when viewed as being supportive of the entire school community,” says Lilley.

The better informed we are as to the needs of our students and the availability of resources, the better placed we are to promote results of strong programming and work to strengthen it. The more the school community understands the great programming in the language department, the better we can advocate when times are tough.

Working Around Detractors

Time (probably the greatest asset in our profession) and a willingness to collaborate are the essential ingredients to aligning expectations and outcomes in a department. Time needs to be set aside on a regular basis to devote to departmental development. If meeting time is not allocated by the district schedule, then the department needs to create the time for this important work. Detractors abound in the form of reluctant or negative department participants, unsupportive administrators, and lack of resources. How do successful departments collaborate and how do they deal with detractors?

The Holliston philosophy on collaboration is succinct with regard to collaboration: “We sought consensus, not majority opinion or unanimous votes,” says Caccavale. Sometimes it is impossible to get the entire faculty to agree on departmental decisions, and consensus is the way to progress and move forward. Often the collaborative energy is contagious and will help to raise the standards of the whole group, or get the group on board with a departmental initiative.

Carol A. Woodbury, Superintendent of Schools in Dennis-Yarmouth, MA, and former Board member of the Massachusetts Foreign Language Association, says, “Persistence and resilience are the two key ingredients professional learning communities must have when they are operating in the face of adversity. It is not necessary to have a large group to make progress. Even two people can collaborate.”

Often, if a select few begin the process of collaborating and raising the departmental standard, others will join in as progress starts to be made. The key is that enthusiasm is contagious and most faculty do want to try to raise the bar. “If we keep modeling what we hope will become the norm and bring people into the fold as they show interest, great things can happen,” says Woodbury.

The authors of this article have found our greatest professional fulfillment in active participation in professional organizations, such as ACTFL, regional organizations, and state and language-specific associations. The connections, resources, and energy that we have made and received from our leadership roles have invigorated our participation in our departments. As we encourage a higher level of participation in these organizations by our departments, we are also raising the bar in departmental collaboration, proficiency orientation and assessment.

As language educators, it is our responsibility to continue to explore the many ways that standardizing practices will strengthen departmental growth and student performance. Encouraging collaboration, exploring online resources, developing common assessments, examining student work, and using a calibration protocol are important tools that improve programming and student results. In the cocktail parties of the future, our students will say, “I took (insert number) years of (insert language) in high school and I use every opportunity to interact with others in the target language because I (select one): work for an international company, travel abroad often, communicate with heritage speakers in my own community, read about current events online in the target language, work in politics, volunteer at a local hospital. I am a lifelong language learner!”

Nicole Sherf is a Professor and Secondary Education Coordinator in the Department of World Languages and Cultures, Salem State University, Salem, Massachusetts.

Tiesa Graf is Department Chair and Spanish teacher at South Hadley High School, South Hadley, Massachusetts.