# Enhancing the "Communities" Goal of the 5Cs for African Language Learning: A Proposal

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## Abstract

This paper demonstrates the need to enhance the *Communities* goal of the ACTFL Standards for students learning African languages as foreign languages. Significantly, it stresses the need for thriving communities or associations outside the classroom where all the parties involved in the teaching and learning of African languages can convene, and where their projects meet, interact, and are exchanged. Specifically, I propose communities where students can go to learn the new as well as to reinforce the old, by virtue of their membership. It is argued that the Communities strand of the five goals is the context within which the four remaining goals converge and flourish.

## Introduction

This paper focuses on ways to enhance the Communities goal of the Standards (also called the 5Cs or five Cs) for students learning African languages as foreign languages. It stresses the centrality of the Communities goal to the actualization of the four other Standards goals (i.e. Communication, Cultures, Connections, and Comparisons), and, suggests ways to improve it for students learning African languages outside the languages' natural environments (Blaz 2002; *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st century* 2006). I hope that designating the Communities goal as *central to the actualization of the Communication, Cultures, Connections, and Comparisons goals* does not create the impression that it is more important than the rest, nor that the five (goals) are placed in some kind of relevance order. Instead, I hold dear the framers' position that the five goals are intertwined with equal importance. That is, each Standards goal is meant to play a unique role that the other goals cannot compensate for in the learning process. The Communities component of the five Standards goals, it is argued, is the context within which the remaining goals converge, and thrive, hence its nomenclature; and yet, it is the least explored of the five Standards goals in the research on the teaching of African languages as foreign languages. This is evident from the kinds of presentations one hears at African Language

Teachers Association (ALTA) conferences, and, also, from our textbooks. It is hoped that the current work will open the floodgate of ideas, innovations, and suggestions on ways to improve this goal for our students in the years ahead. The successes in the teaching of English and other commonly taught languages in the United States are due in part to the fact that these languages, unlike African languages (most of which fall within the less commonly taught languages' bracket), have thriving language communities within this country; these communities exist out of the nuclear/classroom community. These outside communities engage the learner either willingly, or unwillingly, and allow for reinforcement and creative usage of target language materials that have been learned in the classroom.

Taking insight from the field of sociology and the above example, I view language learning and acquisition as an acculturation process that takes place at two social levels, a primary socialization context (i.e., the classroom community), and a secondary socialization context. These levels are in constant interaction with each other and sustain each other. The secondary socialization context is the language community within which the classroom language community is a microcosm. Let us simply call these two communities the inner language community and the outer language community, respectively. This paper is based on the argument that if students are going to acquire African languages as foreign languages the way we expect them to, there should be, and they must be members of, thriving outer language communities beyond their classroom communities. These outer communities should engage them both directly and indirectly, willingly, and unwillingly, to use target language materials learned in the classroom in creative ways. It is these thriving outer language communities that I envision for African language programs in the US; further, I suggest ways to build them and invite all stakeholders to participate in their creation and sustenance.

The rest of the paper has been divided as follows: (a) *The Standards Document – its' philosophy and history, and the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Connection* – in this section, I place the Standards' document in the historical and theoretical contexts it was written; (b) *The Standards Goals: Practical Application* – this section focuses on my understanding of the Standards goals as revealed through two class projects, and, consequently, the context whereby all stakeholders are invited to shape the Communities goal; (c) *Enhancing the Communities Divide: A Proposal* – here, I suggest ways to improve the Communities divide of the five Standards goals for the learning of African languages outside these languages' natural contexts; and, (d) *a conclusion*.

## The Standards Document – its philosophy and history, and the CLT Connection

I have provided below the statement of philosophy for the Standards for Foreign Language Learning, to provide the context within which instructors of African languages will find the Communities goal. This statement of philosophy (Blaz 2002:3) consists of (a) a general statement, which is a 'vision statement,' and (b) the five Standards goals which are comprised of Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. The statement of philosophy and the Standards goals read as follows:

> [Philosophy:] Language and communication are at the heart of the human experience. The United States must educate students who are linguistically and culturally equipped to communicate successfully in a pluralistic American society and abroad. This imperative envisions a future in which ALL students will develop and maintain proficiency in English and at least one other language, modern or classical. Children who come to school from non-English backgrounds should also have opportunities to develop further proficiencies in their first language."
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> [The Standards goals – the five Cs:]
>
> **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 [through the study of other languages]
>
> *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 [that is unavailable to monolingual English speakers]

*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 [and realize that multiple ways of viewing the world exist]

*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. (Blaz 2002: 3)

Following is a brief account of how the Standards document came to become part of the language curriculum in US schools. The story begins with a legislative success, as has typically been the case in educative improvements in the United States of America since its founding. It began in 1993 with the United States House of Representatives' approval of the *Goal 2000: Educate America Act. Goal 2000: Educate America Act*, which was passed into law in 1994 with amendments in 1996, calls for improved teaching and learning, and, higher student performance, in specific subject areas, namely, mathematics, English, foreign language learning, etc. The national Standards document for foreign languages was written in response to this act. It was written by an eleven-member professional organization led by the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) with the help of

business leaders, government officials, and community members. Many language teachers (and others) were also said to have received drafts of the document for feedback (Blaz 2002). Through cooperation and collaboration, these professional groups, and all who agreed to assist in the project, answered the call for excellence in foreign language teaching posed by the political forces by producing the generic national Standards document for foreign languages in 1996.

The national Standards document is very significant in the field of foreign language study in the sense that it "establishes [as has never been before] a new context that defines the central role of foreign language in the learning careers of every student" (*Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st century*, 2006:15). Specifically, it challenges professionals with questions like: What essentials skills and knowledge do students need to acquire in the learning of foreign languages, and, what should students know and be able to do – and how well? The standard's goals are student-centered. They are meant to guide educators in "preparing students who can use the foreign languages they are learning in meaningful ways in real life situations" (*Standards for foreign language learning in the 21st century*, 2006:15).[1]

The first two sentences of the Standards' philosophy, as well as claims like, "Communication is the Cornerstone" (Blaz 2002: 10), all attest to the document's communication-centeredness. Such statements are manifestations of the enormous impact the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) theory had on its framing. As pointed out by Blaz (2002), "[t]hey [i.e. the framers of the national Standards' document] seem to have decided that, whereas grammar and vocabulary are essential tools, it is the acquisition of the ability to communicate in meaningful and appropriate ways with users of other languages that is the goal in today's classroom." This quotation succinctly captures both the theoretical and methodological contexts that shaped the Standards' document. It was written at a time most scholars were dissatisfied with grammar-centered theories and teaching methods in particular and were as a result embracing the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach fully. CLT is fundamental to the fulfillment of the Standards and goals, and cannot be overlooked in this paper.

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[1] Readers need to be reminded that the standards document for foreign languages is not a syllabus, nor a curriculum, as the document itself warns. It is a generic document meant to guide pedagogical decisions and choices; in that regard, it is not a stand-alone document. As noted in Blaz (2000:2) "[the] details [of it] were intentionally omitted so the curricular decisions could be made closer to the classroom…" In other words, it is a document that needs to be fleshed out to be made relevant to whichever language is brought to it and in ways that respect the ideals of the five standards goals.

Brown (2001) sets the beginnings of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach between the late 1970s and early 1980s, and, has the following to say about it:

> The late 1980s and 1990s saw the development of approaches that highlighted the fundamentally communicative properties of language, and classrooms were increasingly characterized by authenticity, real-world simulations, and meaningful tasks. … Today we continue our professional march through history. Beyond grammatical and discourse elements in communication, we are probing the nature of social, cultural, and pragmatic features of language. We are exploring pedagogical means for 'real-life' communication in the classroom. … We are equipping our students with tools for generating unrehearsed language performance "out there" when they leave the womb of our classrooms. We are concerned with how to facilitate lifelong language learning among our students, not just with the immediate classroom task. We are looking at learners as partners in a cooperative venture. And our classroom practices seek to draw on whatever intrinsically sparks learners to reach their fullest potential. (Brown 2001: 42 – 43)

Associated with CLT are principles like the following: (a) cooperative and collaborative learning, which stresses partnership, i.e. pair work, group/teamwork, sharing/exchange of information, come to each other aid; (b) interactive learning, which allows for authentic/real-world/genuine interaction in the classroom, or simulations of it, the aim of which is to prepare students for real-world language usage; (c) learner-centered classes, which allow for creativity and innovation, and enhance competence; (d) content-centered education; (e) whole language acquisition; and, (f) communicative approach (see: Brown 2001: 46 – 50). From the above, it can be inferred that CLT principles are not inimical to the dictates of the goals of the Standards, but they instead complement one another.

The beauty of the national Standards document's story very much rests on the cooperation, the collaboration, and the innovations (i.e. these key CLT attributes) that rendered the production of the document possible. It is hoped that this story will inspire African language practitioners here in the US to work together in order to strengthen their community-based, as the current paper aims to promote. The following section concerns the practical application of the Standards goals, and continues to emphasize the central

role key CLT principles – such as cooperation, collaboration, innovation, and sharing – play in the actualization of the Standards goals.

## The Standards Goals: Practical Application

Two projects that I have been utilizing in foreign language Akan classrooms—a video project and a writing project—are used in this section to highlight the following to readers: (a) practical application of the five goals of the Standards document; (b) my understanding/interpretation of the five goals of the Standards document as revealed through the two projects; and (c) the context all stakeholders are invited to join in the dialogue and the innovations necessary to enhance the Communities divide of the five goals for our students.

The video and the writing projects are some of the strategies that I have been employing over the years to "… prevent previously learned [target] language materials from sinking into oblivion as [learners transition] from one level of instructional and acquisition goals, and emphasis to [another]…" (Ofori 2009: 61 – 62). The course instructor works closely with his/her students during these two projects, helping students to capture as much as possible students' target language exposure/experience at a given instructional level (i.e. each semester). It has been observed that putting items learned in these formats promotes easy review and unsupervised reinforcement. As noted by Ofori (2009: 69) "… relevant and easily accessible target language materials coupled with students' enthusiasm and willingness to engage such products are the chief ingredients for retention …" (Ofori 2009: 69).[2] Reinforcement (i.e., frequent usage of target language items learned) is key to retention, with the frequency of creative, authentic

[2]Ofori (2009) identifies 'the period of teacher-student disengagement', and scarcity of student-friendly target language materials to make up for this disengagement period or to promote effective and unsupervised revision of items covered at previous levels of language learning, as some of the causes of non-retention of target language materials, and as one of the main reasons why most students do not acquire the target language. 'The period of teacher-student disengagement' is the period of time that students have no contact with the language teacher, who is often their main source of information, during long periods, such as school vacations. These projects help document students' language exposure at the different levels of the learning process. Over the years, the two projects and many others have been used in an unsupervised manner, to help students review, reinforce, and retain target language materials covered at the different levels of learning. This problem is not unique to the teaching of Akan as a foreign language and so raises the questions: How do we share these practices or even the products that come out of them with other scholars and students in the field, and how could our program (i.e. how do scholars and students in our program) equally benefit from successful products and practices in other institutions? This paper argues that there should be a platform where these kinds of projects (i.e. students, class, and program projects) can be displayed, discussed, and shared. The question then is: what should be the nature of such platform(s) of exchange?

(i.e. socio-culturally meaningful), unconscious, and transactional usage of the target language presented as key ingredients for proficiency. Such are some of the core principles that motivate these kinds of projects.

## *The Video Project*

The video project is the course instructor's idea but students are responsible for the actualization of the idea. They write the text for the video based on the semester's work with the help of the language instructor. Students ask very important socio-cultural questions while putting the script for the video together; answers to these questions are very important in the sense that they help students to situate the new language in its real-world context where native-speaker comprehension lies. The goal of creating the video is to bring isolated items and scenarios that are covered in the given semester into a system (i.e., one whole big event). Connecting items learned into a system is a way of making items learned (i.e., concepts, scenarios, etc) relevant to one another (especially when the language is being learned outside its sociocultural context). The assumption is that it is easier to recollect a large number of items learned in a system as opposed to remembering them as isolated units. The belief, also, is that if students are responsible for creating the text for the video (with minimal support from the instructor), they will equally be excited in learning it for performance. Following is an example of a video project I have worked on with students in the past at the elementary level. The scenario format was followed in both the creation and the learning of the script.

The title of the story is *Abenaa da* 'Abenaa's day' named after the protagonist, Abenaa, a young woman.[3] The story is structured in such a way that the protagonist encounters, and uses the target language in the range of scenarios that are covered in the first-semester Akan class. Following is a summary of the storylines (interspaced with the sub-scenarios are songs, drumming, and dancing by students):

[3] Abenaa is 'a day name,' a female born on Tuesday. A day name is the name a male or a female receives according to the day of the week on which he or she was born. Adding a day name on the title highlights this important and unique naming practice of the Akan people. Following are the Akan day names – day names appear in bracket, the first of names in a bracket is male, and the second is female: Sunday/*Kwasiada (Kwasi, Akosua);* Monday/*Dwoada (Kwadwo, Adwoa);* Tuesday/*Benada (Kwabena, Abenaa);* Wednesday/*Wukuada (Kwaku, Akua);* Thursday/*Yawoada (Yaw, Yaa);* Friday/*Fiada (Afia, Kofi);* Saturday/*Memeneda (Kwame, Amma)* (Ofori 2006: 6).

(i) The story is set in Accra, the capital city of Ghana where the new language (Akan) has life or relevance, and where some of these students will eventually visit. Abenaa is in Ghana on a study abroad program.

(ii) One day, she leaves her home in Adɛnta, a suburb of Accra, where she is staying with a Ghanaian family) to go and visit her friends. The purpose of her visit is to learn how to cook some Ghanaian dishes. From her friends' house in Madina, also a suburb of Accra, she plans to go to the University of Ghana campus where she is studying.

(iii) She decides to walk to her friends' house in Madina and on her way meets several people; she greets some of them and some of them greet her.

(iv) She knocks on the door at her friends' house and they allow her in. She greets them upon entering and they respond to her greeting. They offer her a seat.

(v) She sits down and they offer her water to drink and ask her mission (i.e. the reason for her visit) which she responds. Abenaa tells them that she will be visiting the University of Ghana campus in Legon and tells them the time she plans to leave their house to go there.

(vi) While she is waiting for the cooking session to start her friends give her their albums; one of the friends sits close to Abenaa to introduce to her those that are pictured in the target language with Abenaa also asking questions in the target language all along.

(vii) The cooking session begins. Abenaa gets to learn names of food items and how to prepare them. She learns names of utensils and how to use them. They share the tasks among themselves and sometimes call upon each other for assistance. In the end they eat some of the meals and Abenaa expresses how much she likes them.

(viii) They finish eating and then wash the utensils, clean the floor of the kitchen, and Abenaa is ready to go to Legon. Her friends accompany her to the nearby bus stop.

(ix) At the bus stop she meets people for the first time. These people are older than her, so she greets them appropriately (i.e., using the

greetings for adults) and they also respond as if she were their daughter. They interact at length at the bus stop. Specifically, they ask Abenaa questions about her country, her state, her hometown, where she goes to school in the US and why she is in Ghana. Abenaa asks them several questions too, and they become friends right there. Abenaa's friends – who have come to see her off – participate in the conversation also.

(x) While they are still waiting for the bus, a seller (i.e., a hawker) passes by with his wares, and one of the women that Abenaa meets at the bus station calls the seller to buy a dress. The seller quotes the prices of the clothing, and the people around help the woman to negotiate for a good deal. What a scene of people holding dresses/shirts against their bodies to see if it will fit them. While this is going on, the other people around say which shirts/dresses are beautiful and which ones are not; which dresses/shirts will fit who and which ones will not fit him or her. In the end, a dress is bought, the price is paid, and the seller gives the customer her change.

(xi) The bus comes, Abenaa gets on the bus to go to Legon, and her friends go back home. They wave at each other as the bus leaves. Abenaa gets off at the bus stop in Legon and goes to the campus. On campus she meets with friends and they discuss things they studied the day before all in the target language.

(xii) When it is evening, Abenaa takes *trɔtrɔ* (the passengers' van) and leaves the campus to go home. At home, she greets her Ghanaian parents using the evening greeting, they too respond. She inquires about the health of her Ghanaian siblings and shares some jokes with them. She changes her dress and goes to the kitchen to help her Ghanaian mum prepare the evening meal. After that she goes to the bathroom to take her bath. She eats. She washes the bowls with her Ghanaian siblings. After that Abenaa and her Ghanaian siblings sit down with their parents to watch TV. They discuss plans for the following day and discuss the program on TV. It is bedtime they bid each other good night and retire to bed.

Tentatively, the above were the different scenarios that we wrote about and were the very scenarios we had covered at the level that the video was made. Each student was guided to be able to perform any of the above roles, but in the end, students decided among themselves who they thought could

fit into which role. The important thing was that each student played a role in the video that was made. These sub-scenarios were built into class activities from day one and students were only called upon to weave such 'manageable chunks' (Oxford 1990: 45) – i.e., sub-scenarios – into a mega-scenario. Series of role-plays were performed on the sub-events in the story and our approach to learning the different scenarios was cyclical, which always allowed old items and scenarios to be reinforced and new ones to be introduced. It must also be pointed out that series of listening, speaking, reading, and writing exercises were administered to students to bring them to the level they needed to be to be able to do these role-plays.

The fact that our goal was to be able to produce this video created a sense of purpose and clarity of goal. In a situation like this, the instructor and his/her students are both aware of what has been acquired, and what remains to be acquired and together strategize ways to get there. In other words, the video project promotes cooperation and collaboration in the classroom right from the beginning. It also allows for each student's abilities, skills, and experiences to be utilized in the process. It is quite magnificent to watch the different students' abilities and skills interact in the language classroom, all in service to the new language. In his Meaningful Learning Framework (MLF), Ausubel (1968:vi) argues that "[t]he most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach [the learner] accordingly." This is what it means to make the new language relevant to students, specifically when students can connect their abilities, skills, and experiences relevantly to their new language, as is permitted by the video project. The project significantly helps connect the human face, the real world, target language socio-cultural products and several familiar images, and technology to the new language in a way that is appealing to sight, easy to 'mentalize' (i.e., commit to memory), and attractive to want to speak it.

The filming is done outside of class in locations and with products close to those of the target language. In other words, through this project, the class has no other option but to connect their classroom target language experiences to their (near) equivalents in their immediate socio-cultural environment. Also, different target language communicative scenarios and roles are performed as real-world events. Here, the target language comes to be associated with a memorable group experience associated with a lifetime in the real-world context, and roles played using the language and aspects of the language used to perform such roles will not easily be forgotten. Connecting words, phrases, sentences, or text, with objects and scenarios 'out there' promotes retention and meaningful learning. The fact that such

encounters are captured on video means that students can revisit items covered at previous levels of language instruction (for reinforcement) at any time – this is made possible by the fact that each student gets a copy of the production to take home. And, students can equally watch the video with loved ones for entertainment and cultural understanding, that is, with the video's many entertaining target language cultural activities (e.g. music, drumming, dancing, cooking) other than language usage. Currently, there are plans to upload these video projects on YouTube as one of the reviewers of this article rightly suggested. The shared goals and the fact that each role and person is vital to the successful completion of the project join students into a community of learners, promote the need to interact with each other, and the need to do so in the target language. The video project gives instructors and students the means to monitor progress at each stage of the acquisition process. It also helps the language program to have an accurate knowledge of what students can do and do well at each level of learning, and what remains to be acquired and may be included as part of the way ahead.

## *The Writing Project*

Following is a brief description of an album project. This is a fifteen-page album project. The pictures used here are: the writer's childhood photo (i.e. when the writer was a baby); high school graduation pictures; first-year college pictures; a picture of the writer in class (here, the writer uses the target language to talk about biology, specifically, the human body), a picture of the writer with her friends and teacher, a picture of the writer and his girlfriend at the grocery store, a picture of the writer's family (i.e. mother, father, siblings, and the family dog), a picture of a family vacation, pictures of the writer's bedroom and kitchen, and lastly a picture of the writer with a car the writer would like to have. Elementary students are supposed to write a minimum of five short sentences describing the occasion, the things, and the people that are pictured; intermediate and advanced students can write up to ten sentences on a single picture, or a whole story on closely related pictures.

The objectives of the writing project have been documented in Ofori (2009: 67 – 68) as follows:

"The … [Album Project – i.e., the writing project] … [is] meant to create a lasting connection between the target language material and learners' socio-cultural experiences in a way that brings value to the target language text for a language is only valuable (i.e., relevant) for what it does, did, can do, or is

made to do for its user(s) in a given space and time. We must therefore create and facilitate … desire for acquisition, which … can happen when learners are made to own the target language (i.e., target language ownership). [Owning the target language] … is, when learners are made and are confidently able to use the target language to express or document their own socio-cultural realities among others, especially to express or document matters close to their hearts such as the AL-P [i.e., the Album Project]. Too often, we, either unconsciously or consciously, insist on adherence to the target language cultural context and events there-in to total neglect or marginalization of the source culture, thus, failing to capitalize on the familiarization that the source language context presents us as one of the means through which the unfamiliar (i.e., the target language and culture) could be presented to the remote learner. [It can be concluded from] … this project … that placing students or anybody related to them … at the center of their target language experience … – in other words, maximizing the extent to which the target language is made to convey/capture students' socio-cultural experiences – has the tendency to boost [retention] … and acquisition. This (i.e., the fact that the learning experience is channeled to matters of great relevance to the learner), among other things, brings value to the target language and for that matter its learning and acquisition."

Ofori's (2009) position is in line with the Meaningful Learning Framework (MLF) (Ausubel 1968), which was described as part of the video project above. According to Ausubel (1968), students learn meaningfully when new materials are linked with existing ideas. Ofori, whose main concern is on language retention and acquisition, has also observed that maximizing the extent to which "the target language" ('representing new material' under MLF) is made to capture "student's socio-cultural experiences" (i.e., 'existing ideas' under MLF) tends to boost retention and acquisition.

**General Reflections on the Two Projects**

In recap, the writing and the video projects grant students – especially, continuing students – the continual exposure that they need to develop proficiency in the target language even when there is no one to speak the language with. This represents how we language educators have been responding in part to the primary intent of the Standards' document, which is that students are granted the opportunity to develop proficiency in the foreign language through speaking, listening, writing, and reading skills. It takes a series of speaking, listening, writing, and reading exercises/activities

for the class to attain these final goals. These projects promote meaningful learning by linking the target language to what learners already know (their abilities, skills, and experiences), as well as to their immediate socio-cultural contexts. And, not only that, but the video project is also purposely done to capture the target language's sociocultural context. The album project converges at some point with the video project; this is when Abenaa visits her friends and is given an album. The need to connect the different experiences together, I have observed, is vital to retention. It needs to be pointed out that the video and album projects are simple techniques for learning (i.e., task-based: Skehan 1998a, 1998b; Williams & Burden 1997) and, as a result, can be replicated at the different levels of instruction, but in line with the goals for those levels. The shared goal and task create the community that is vital to the promotion and actualization of the Standards goals. Below, I explain how these projects promote the 5Cs, the Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities goals.

**The Standards Goals in Action in the Two Projects**

The following subsections focus on the extent to which the Standards goals' principles have been respected in the two projects. At the same time, they represent how I have come to embrace them practically, the context within which readers are invited to assess the call, and the proposals for improving the Communities goal.

**The Communication Goal in Action**

By allowing students to expansively document/represent their socio-cultural experiences in the target language, the writing project (or the album project) is an important product of students' communication, and an effective language learning tool with its voice association, class presentation, and discussion.[4] Through the use of this project, students have gained mastery of how to talk at length about their families, friends, and also about things and other people in their immediate socio-cultural context(s) and beyond. The fun part of this project is to watch your students talk about these pictures and answer questions asked about their presentations in the target language without any aid. The joy is comparable to that of a parent whose child has been able to take many steps unsupported – all you hope for is an equal partner in walking, and soon. It takes a great deal of student-teacher

[4] Stories written about students' pictures are always recorded, hence the phrase "voice association."

collaboration to reach such a level of acquisition, but whatever the challenges are, in the end, the benefits outweigh the costs.

The aim of the video project at the elementary level, for example, is to empower students to engage in basic communication in the target language and to be very good at it. The fact that students have a good grasp of items learned in the classroom situation, it has been observed, makes them very enthusiastic about learning the new language, as well as instilling a desire to use it frequently. The target language classroom becomes a micro-community by virtue of the fact that the different roles require that learners interact. The fact that the different roles are interdependent is such that for a student to be able to perform their role creditably, they must understand the other roles that interact with their own, and also must be in a position to be able to perform such roles equally well. Some students are nervous about the filming part, but such worries dissipate quickly with encouragement and good preparation. It is always helpful to slice the script for the video – which can be described as a mega socio-cultural document/scenery – into mini-communicative goals, or what Oxford (1990: 45) calls "manageable chunks." It takes great skill to do this. The individually manageable chunks (e.g., in the form of two-sentence role-plays) are sewn back together, piece upon piece, as students acquire them. This goes on until the many pieces have been acquired and the pieces are neatly sewn back together. The goal here is the acquisition, and it takes a good deal of interpersonal communication to attain it.

In conclusion, it takes a sense of community, ownership of the target language, frequent and very intense practice, and determination on everyone's part to accomplish each project.

**The Cultures Goal in Action**

According to Blaz (2002: 54), "[i]f you are teaching language in context and using culturally appropriate texts, you will be teaching culture," and "[s]tudents cannot truly master a language until they have mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs, and so knowledge of the culture of the target language is essential." The first of the two quotations supports the broadness of *Context over Culture*. For this reason, I often choose the former over the latter in my approach to both teaching and material development. If the Culture goal embraces practice, product, and perspective (Blaz 2002), the use of Context in its place at least widens the scope to include also all that is natural, and which can only be found in the target language communities. Given the broadness of Context over Culture, and the fact that

the latter can be subsumed within the former, it is not unreasonable at all for one to suggest that Context replace the Culture component of the five goals permanently.

The writing project has the unique cultural element, which one does not find in the video project, of the family – both the nuclear and the extended family. As basic as the family is to everyone, so must be the target language that allows one to talk about it. The writing project, with its focus on a primary socialization institution like the family (commonly referred to as the miniature society) and everything embedded in or related to it, gives the learner this opportunity to reflect, and more importantly to construct through speech, this important social institution using the target language. It has been observed over the years that the language associated with the family is acquired faster than other parts of language and is the last to be forgotten. The writing project allows for a thorough discussion about the family and individual family members. It allows us to talk about reciprocity and collective responsibility in the context of the target language's culture and society. This discussion could be done in a language that learners are very familiar with at the elementary level. The potency of this project, also, is in the large amount of cultural information that can be generated from a single picture. This is made possible by the fact that each picture's context is an output of a network of contexts – that is, a mere picture context is simply an atom of a very large network of contexts.

It has been observed that "[t]he overwhelming motivation for Americans to learn LCTLs is the intention to interact with the cultures of these languages" (Walker and McGinnis 1995: 1; Manley, 2008: 19). The LCTL teacher is therefore duty-bound, as the majority of learners have had no prior LCTL cultural exposure, to create "… a classroom culture that permits learners to socialize progressively according to C2 (target culture) Standards" (Walker and McGinnis, 1995, p. 14; Manley, 2008, 19). Such were some of the observations that shaped the video project. Several target language cultural items were represented in the video project, some of which are: how to gain entry into a house; greetings and responses (age and gender-appropriate greetings and responses, occupational greetings and responses, etc.); how to open a conversation (both formal and informal conversations); turn taking; body language (gestures); how to welcome someone; offering a drink or food; inviting someone to a meal; accepting and declining an offer; daily cultural observances; rites of passage; religion and religious practices in the target language's socio-cultural context; transportation; occupation; modern and traditional forms of recreation; meals and how to prepare them; and, cultural products, such as adornments, currency, songs, buildings, cars,

games, etc. These varied cultural practices, products, perspectives, and scenarios are basic to the target language communities; representing them in the video gives students a taste of how the target language communities operate. Cultural authenticity in the video is assured with the direction of an instructor who has native knowledge of the target language's socio-cultural context.

## The Connections Goal in Action

I have broadened the scope of Connections from mere connection with disciplines/subject areas (Blaz 2002:73-92) to everything we do with language, given that everything we do and/or talk about in this life falls, in one way or the other, within one discipline, or across disciplines. The scope of Connections has been to make it everything that goes on in the language classroom, from more mundane tasks such as greetings, and asking about one's health and name, to less basic tasks, such as the study of the human anatomy, etc. Under this new outlook of the concept, I have come to assume and operate within two types of Connections in my duties as a language teacher; these are: (a) daily non-technical connection and (b) technical/in-depth subject-area connection. The former is what I seek to enforce at the early stage of instruction, which is the basic knowledge of any subject area as required for basic, daily communication. As for the full realization of the latter (b), I leave that to the TL subject teacher and interested novice students to pursue in-class projects and/or presentations.[5]

There is a basic connection of the TL with geography, music, technology, photography, cooking, sociology (i.e., family, friends, social roles, and structure, etc.), culture, linguistics, mathematics, and so on in the two projects. The areas and issues covered in each of these projects give the beginning student the basics of what it takes to fully engage and specialize in these subject areas in other spheres and this, I believe, must be the teacher's goal—and not necessarily that of the student—a very elementary stage.

## The Comparisons Goal in Action

[5] The technical/in-depth subject-area connection can be pursued within the goal-based approach proposed by Folarin-Schleicher (1999). The goal-based approach seeks to integrate the learner's overall interests and specific goals within the language learning and teaching objectives. It is an effective tool for covering subject areas in the absence of subject courses in a foreign language.

The fact that one has prior well-internalized experience(s) of 'something' and is faced with the task of learning (a) variant(s) of the same experience(s) is what engenders comparison. Comparison of the two languages in form (structure) and context (i.e., cultural, and natural, context) is cognitively the learner's assessment of how much existing knowledge from his/her prior experience(s) can be utilized to facilitate his/her acquisition of the new experience. This makes comparison an indispensable cognitive activity in the foreign language learning and acquisition process. What this means is that the foreign language learner is bound to compare the two languages in form and in context even without the teacher spearheading this action.

From the above, comparison is a powerful learning tool in the sense that it saves the learner from having to learn a new language from scratch. My own approach has always been 'reflexive', which is to say that the target language is used to describe its structure and context, and no room is given to the source language. This is doable with the right linguistic and cultural aids (e.g., visuals – pictures, an activity, music, etc.), especially when such teaching aids appeal to all the senses.

Concerning the writing project, asking students to write extensively about the source language's sociocultural context using the target language allows for inter-linguistic and intercultural comparisons. Concepts are cultural artifacts – their meanings are largely specific to the communities that created them, and to be able to use them like their makers requires an untainted cultural understanding of what they are and are meant to achieve, when in use in the social milieu that owns them. Again, the two languages (i.e., the source and the target language) are compared frequently in their structure and in their respective cultures in preparing students to perform meaningfully and relevantly for the video project. Significantly, a comparison is made while students are using the target language for lifelong creative activities (i.e., via writing or enactment of the video script).

## The Communities Goal in Action

An unclear designation about what 'community' is in the context of foreign language teaching and learning makes it very difficult to determine the length and breadth of this goal. Taking insights from existing definitions of the term, particularly in reference to insights from the German sociologist Tönnies' (1887:22) definition of the term as a 'unity of will' (*Gemeinschaft*) and/or of "self-interest" (*Gesellschaft)*, my working definition of the term has been: *any two or more persons tied together by the event(s) of (a given period of) time*

*and/or space*. Again, there is a key directive I have embraced in my dealings with the Standards goals (Blaz, 2002), which reads: "students [must] use the language both within and beyond the school setting." The phrase 'within and beyond the school setting' in the above quotation equally describes the two communities identified in the introduction—the inner language community (i.e., the classroom setting) and the outer language communities (i.e. the school setting and settings beyond)—well. The writing project (or the album project) has consistently allowed students to bring their own communities and community experiences to the target language in the form of pictures, and this is what it means to own a language, to be able to use it to express one's everyday experience. As expressed earlier, considering your classroom as a micro-community maximizes communication in the target language classroom. What unites students in the video project is what Tönnies describes as a 'unity of will' and as 'self-interest'—the collective desire students have to learn Akan/Twi— facilitated by the requirement that roles assigned to students meet and interact. Significantly, students are allowed to perform the video project in an African language and African community festival, and their album projects at language tables.

## Enhancing the Communities Goal: A Proposal

There is a sense, after reading the existing literature or after listening to several ALTA conference presentations, that Communication and Culture are the most important goals (Blaz, 2002). What about the Communities goal? Are Communication and Culture not community-based? And do Communities not define and sustain Communication and Culture? Are not the four goals (i.e., Communication, Cultures, Connections, and Comparisons) relationship with Communities one of part-and-whole, Communities being the whole, and the rest just its constitutive parts? And, if so, why aren't Communities the most important goal both in the classroom and outside of it, given that it is the reason for which the four components exist in the first place? We can roundly defend the importance of one goal over the other, and we may be right in our argument depending on the context in which the argument is made. I wish to reiterate the point that the goals, in principle, are not in any relevant order. Communities is the goal (i.e., the context) within which the remaining goals converge and thrive, but not in the sense that the Communities goal is more important than any of the other four goals. The goals are in principle equal in importance in the sense that each has a unique role/place in the learning process for which the others

cannot make up. Therefore, any attempt to possibly rank them is, or ought to be, need-based. The Communities goal has been selected for attention because it is the least explored of the five in the teaching and learning of African languages as foreign languages. What educators need to work more on in the teaching of African languages here in the US is the Communities goal, and, on that basis, should be seen as the most important of the five goals currently. Community guarantees constant communication (which most students of African languages lack), but this is not necessarily true vice versa. Also, once there is a dynamic Community, there is a way of life (i.e., Culture); that is, Culture (specifically, the target language culture and even a comparison of it with the source culture) comes alive or becomes a reality, and not something written in a textbook. Again, the Connection goal, as specified by Blaz (2002), is taken care of within a thriving and engaging Community, with its many different interests, strengths/abilities, and specializations (or varied use of the target language) in place.

Community—more especially, the outer community, in our case the outer language community—is the marketplace wherein innovations, creativity, abilities, skills, and experiences are showcased, lived, admired, assessed, and/or accessed for the betterment of the parties involved. It thrives upon the recognition that we need to support one another in some common issue that confronts us (in our case, the teaching and learning of African languages), and that without cooperation, collaboration, exchange, and sometimes compromise, all can very easily fail. Unity of will and of self-interest are indications of peoples' recognition of and admission to this essential truth, and a pulling together of the different abilities, skills, experiences, innovations, creativities, and resources that are at the disposal of each of the parties involved to confront common challenges. The video and writing projects referred to in this paper represent some of the many creative projects African language teachers have embarked upon and continue to implement in order to help their students learn and acquire the languages they teach. Such are our efforts at the inner language community level (i.e., the classroom context). I want to use this medium to commend African language teachers within this category for such creative projects, most of which are without financial support from their institutions. All of these projects are also representative of the attempt to address the scarcity of instructional materials in the field (Thompson, 2008), or to make the few existing teaching materials utilizable in the foreign language context or supplement them.

But let us pause for a moment and imagine what a great impact we could have on the teaching of our languages and on our field in general to have a

place (or communities) whereby creativities can converge, interact, and be exchanged all in the advancement of our respective programs. Improved communities will serve as platforms whereby problems of scarcity of teaching materials, and/or, of non-retention of items learned can be dealt with. An improved Communities goal will also go a long way in advancing language teaching and learning in the sense that it is at the communities' level that the communications, cultures, connections, and comparisons components of the five goals converge and thrive. That is, an improved community will provide students with the wider communicative exposure and engagement they so much need in order to retain and advance their study of the target language. It is in this regard that I make the following proposals towards the advancement of the communities divide of the five goals: (a) three outer language communities are being proposed here, namely (i) an Intra-school Language Community, (ii) an Inter-schools Language Community, and (iii) a Learner-Heritage-Speaker Community; and also being proposed are (b) three student associations, each with its own website.

If you already possess these communities, the following suggestions will probably help you to strengthen them. Intra-school community involves bringing the entire language student body of an institution together regularly for an individual, a group, or a class presentation, aside from the regular in-class presentations. This will promote meaningful learning (that is, understanding, and retention of the target language) in the sense that the student presenter will be required to explain aspects of their target language to his/her colleagues (Web, 1989; Chi, de Leeuw, Chiu, & La-Vancher, 1994; Thompson, 2008). This should be a one hour and thirty-minute presentation, every month; and, we must do our best to have the following time division and activities in each presentation session: the first thirty minutes ought to be devoted to socialization and the playing and/or singing of songs by students or a student band in the target language, thirty minutes of the actual presentation, and thirty minutes of discussion in the target language.

There should be, for each language, an intra-school and an inter-school language community/association, each association with a website where the achievements of members can be published and shared by the two communities. Aside from the above (local and national) language-specific communities/associations, there should also be a local/intra-school inter-language and a national/inter-school inter-language association /community, to be called *All African Language Students Association* (AALSA), which every African language student will be advised to join. This association, like the other associations, must have a website where students' works in the target language will be published or displayed for national recognition.

Students from one institution must have access to projects taking place at other institutions. There should be a place where achievements at the institutional level can also be showcased. I am therefore proposing an *All African Languages Website*. This website will be a news outlet and a voice from the African continent. News items will be presented and/or analyzed in ways that are useful to the foreign language learner in each of the languages taught here in the US. This *All African Languages* website should provide links to the many different websites on students, class, and institutional projects where the most outstanding of projects are displayed, shared, discussed, and commented on for potential improvements. Examples of such projects include: class-centered projects like the video project described in this paper; *Languages and Cultures at IUB* (2004), and *Listening Exercises at IUB* (2006) of Indiana University – Bloomington, under the direction of Professor Alwiya Omar; *Magazeti online: Fourth semester Swahili speaking course* (2001), and, *Utamaduni: An advanced level course in Swahili language and culture* (2006) by Professor Magdalena Hauner of the University of Wisconsin, just to mention a few. If we are going to survive and grow as a field, we must work together on those aspects that will enhance our collective survival and growth. We need to know what other educators are doing, especially in material development, so that we can learn from one another. In other words, let us grow as a field through exchange and collaboration. We may not have the funding or the necessary institutional support to teach political science or mathematics in the target language, but we can do these things, which will go a long way to enhancing the Connections goal, easily on the web.

In addition to everything proposed above, I am also proposing an *All African Language Students Association Conference* (AALSAC). The main goal of the conference should be to promote student publication in the target language. Such publications must always come with their English versions if this is to be done online. AALSAC, in its nascent years, can meet with ALTA. One may ask: who should take the leadership of such a conference? My humble suggestion is that the National African Language Resource Center (NALRC), under the directorship of Professor Antonia Schleicher, which has been our home for most projects in our field, working with some students and also Professors in the African Languages and Literature department (all at the UW-Madison Madison), should be able to start the national African languages website part of this proposal. What we need right now is for coordinators of participating institutions to convince directors and African Studies Centers in their respective institutions of the need to make financial contributions towards this project.

To the best of our ability, we must also involve the heritage community in our areas in our teaching. The question is: how do we go about doing this? I propose a *Learners-and-Heritage-Speakers Community* (LEHSC). This should be an association to which every student must belong. It is easier to make our students join such an association than it is to bring members of the heritage community (of a language) on board. From experience, I know that students love to know more about our cultures, while at the same time, the heritage community members are also very busy trying to make ends meet. The question then changes to one of: how do we become and stay attractive to the heritage community in our respective areas? Indisputably, members of the heritage community love to share their language and culture with others, and, again, are very proud of the fact that their language has 'come that far.' As immigrants, we want to be understood by the host culture, which is what both the heritage communities and the teaching of the languages are primarily trying to achieve (but at different levels of society). Working together, therefore, is not an option but a necessity, if we both are going to make the impact we wish to make on the host culture. Very often we as educators are the party saddled with countless institutional restrictions – how open and comfortable are we as instructors or as a program with inviting in the heritage community? Involving the heritage community in our teaching takes students to a whole new level of cultural and linguistic adventurism, experience, and enrichment that the classroom situation often cannot provide our students, such that it becomes clear that interacting with the heritage community is the right thing to do for our students.

For the heritage community to be engaged to serve us, we must first serve them or acknowledge their services in kind. The agendas for our meetings with this vital community must be well-defined and must focus on things students have learned in the classroom and need reinforcement on, and/or other topics that students would like to have a conversation about; the target language must be the sole medium of communication in such extracurricular encounters. For example, we can learn to cook an indigenous meal from members of the heritage community, with the cost shared between students and the program when the program cannot cover all supplies. Other ideas include playing games like soccer; assigning students to homes to help children with reading, mathematics, etc.; and, as a program, we can develop online programs that will help these same children learn their parents' native language. Our students also need exposure to key heritage community events; at such events, students can perform a story, a play, or songs for the heritage community audience. In his (2006) paper, Mohochi points out how students from East Africa offer Swahili students the opportunity to use Swahili outside

the classroom situation. Such cooperation from these East African students is a perfect example of how willing and ready our heritage communities are to engage with our students. The best way to sustain such cooperation outside the classroom as well as make it beneficial, not just to one but to both parties, is to institutionalize it, which is what the current paper is proposing.

We surely need a place wherein both instructors and students in the US, and, also, people and institutions across the globe who are interested in what we do, can commune to promote and share in our individual and collective achievements in this field. This is the new Community I am proposing: a place where different ideas and projects are presented, debated, and exchanged. This proposal emanates from my conviction that no single institution or language instructor can do everything it takes to teach a language as a foreign language alone, hence this proposal for a new level of partnership and cooperation. This is my call to all stakeholders – to work together to shape the positions that have been expressed here and to do everything within our ability and influence to implement whatever the outcome of this dialogue may be. In the words of Bruner (1960: 31), "[t]he best way to create interest in a subject is to render it worth knowing, which means to make the knowledge gained usable in one's thinking beyond the situation in which learning has occurred." An (improved) outer language community will not simply generate interest in students to study our languages but will also sustain it. Tinto (1998: 171) describes the importance of learning communities this way, "… learning communities seek to involve students both socially and intellectually in ways that promote intellectual development as well as an appreciation for the many ways in which one's own knowing is enhanced when other 'voices' are part of that knowing." Also, "…by forming learning communities/ associations…students discover a 'voice' that they may not have previously recognized or had recognized by others" (Tinto 1998: 172). That is, in order for students to have a voice in what and how we teach them, the formation of student associations/communities is necessary.

## Conclusion

Having a common place where our respective achievements in the target language can be displayed and shared will significantly generate competition in material development among contributors, which is what we currently need to keep pace with languages like English, Spanish, French, and German. The teaching of African languages has come to stay in the US, but for the

field to expand, we need the contributions of all stakeholders (consumers, practitioners, well-wishers, and experts). More significantly, our student base must be organized and energized, since the future is and will always be theirs; the community that the students' association provides is, in my opinion, the way forward. To colleagues in this profession, I say, '*Promote ye the Communities Goal and the other four will automatically be promoted!*' Cooperation and collaboration must be our guiding principles moving forward, for no individual or language program can achieve the Standards document's philosophy and vision alone, particularly in this era of increased specialization.

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