

How Receptive to New Ideas Are We? Reading and Listening Proficiency

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'DOES ALL this emphasis on 'proficiency' mean that our students will not be prepared to read or understand or discuss great literature?' Thus is voiced the fear of a number of colleagues whose primary training and interests are in literary research and teaching. Clearly, this fear is not completely ill-founded: the term *proficiency* in the title of an April 1986 article meant oral proficiency alone (Bart). Under the influence of the proficiency movement, many colleagues have advocated speaking proficiency as the main goal of foreign language study (Schulz). What about reading and listening, the skills of comprehension rather than production? Although the ACTFL/ETS Proficiency Guidelines began as an adaptation of the ILR Oral Proficiency Rating Scale, they have for years included level definitions for listening, reading, and writing as well. In addition, the possibilities of proficiency in curriculum development in all four skill areas are evidenced by grant-funded workshops on curriculum and instruction at the University of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University, and Indiana University of Pennsylvania, among others, and, as early as 1983, ACTFL conducted a Symposium on Receptive Language Skills, held at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California (Papers). Thus, the four skill areas have long been part of the proficiency framework.

But what of the theoretical basis of the proficiency movement itself? As usual with the appearance of any new movement or theory, opponents have leapt forth to question various aspects of the proficiency levels, assumptions, and directions. Such opposition and inquiry is healthy; in fact, a similar scrutiny has been suggested by advocates of proficiency. Especially valuable could be the recent calls of both sides for active research into second language acquisition and the learning process (see, e.g., Bernhardt, 'Proficient Texts'; Byrnes, 'Second Language'; *Proficiency and the Profession*; and Wing). Such research leads to new ways of looking at listening and reading and may provide the insights we need to improve our methods of teaching the receptive skills.

The use of the term *receptive* is telling: While the teaching of grammar and vocabulary has always taken precedence over the teaching and practice of receptive skills, listening and reading are no longer considered passively obtained skills. It is now recognized that to receive a message, a listener or reader must interact with the spoken or written text, actively searching for and recognizing meaning. As Byrnes puts it, "receptive skills center on *producing understanding*" ('Teaching' 78).

With respect to second language acquisition, proficiency-oriented curriculum developers realize that the receptive skills will normally develop and progress more quickly than the so-called active skills of speaking and writing. This view apparently motivates comprehension-based theories of language teaching (e.g., Terrell, Winitz), which argue that comprehension skills should be taught before production skills. According to Krashen's theoretical "input hypothesis," students learn language best when they are exposed—by listening or reading—to "comprehensible input," that is, input just beyond their current level of competence. Its meaning is generally easy enough for them to grasp, and they can figure out how the newer elements fit in with the old. Through understanding what they hear and read, students acquire new forms.

Thus, for many second language learning specialists (and for those advocating literary study as a road to better personal expression), listening and reading lead to speaking and writing. Instead of indicating a hierarchy in which the receptive skills must be taught first, however, this revised view of the interaction of language skills has led to a complete reexamination of how we understand foreign languages. There is a renewed interest in how meaning is derived from language, as evidenced by the oft-quoted "Reading is less

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a matter of extracting sound from print than of bringing meaning to print" (Smith 2). To comprehend successfully, one must expect to find meaning in what one reads or hears. But "meaning" does not reside in the printed or spoken word alone; listeners and readers have certain expectations about the communication based on, for example, the source of the text, the tone of voice, the title of the article, illustrations, and gestures. These expectations come from general background knowledge, including cultural patterns and conventions, factual knowledge, and life experiences. Together, all these sorts of paralinguistic information provide listeners and readers with a schema or script into which to fit the new information heard or read. Smith's description of this interaction between properly linguistic and paralinguistic information—"the more nonvisual information a reader has, the less visual information the reader needs" (5)—is equally valid with respect to listening. Common sense suggests that the extent of such knowledge and the nature of one's expectations will influence the comprehensiveness and accuracy of what the listener or reader hears or reads. Instead of listening for individual sounds or reading for individual words, for example, successful comprehenders often work in the opposite direction, from the top down, from larger units (e.g., ideas and phrases) to smaller ones (individual sounds and words). Granted, many reading-process models stress the interaction of top-down and bottom-up processing (e.g., the need to check spelling when a perceived word makes little sense); still, our relatively recent attention to hypothesizing, predicting, and searching for meaning when listening or reading opens the door to a number of comprehension strategies.

First, we are aware of individual differences in the learning process. As Phillips points out, students differ in their backgrounds, in their language skills and vocabularies, and in their aptitudes and inclinations. For instance, some listeners and readers are more likely than others to take risks in predicting language patterns or text direction or in guessing word meanings. We can, however, encourage such risk taking by incorporating guessing activities in class; students learn from one another, both in how to guess from context or to use word-formation rules and in how to take a chance before picking up a dictionary. Similarly, in-class prereading or prelistening activities such as brainstorming or discussion will elicit requisite background knowledge from the students who have it and will make it available to those who don't.

Numerous comprehension strategies are at work in the minds of successful listeners and readers: they consider context; they predict what might come next and compare that prediction to the subsequent text; they are willing to take risks; they look for the gist; they

listen and read with a purpose (e.g., as one reads a film schedule to find an interesting movie to see). Such strategies develop students' analytical powers, especially when the students are asked to participate actively in their development. Moreover, working on strategy development with students reflects the learner-centered approach of teaching toward proficiency (Richardson). Fourth-semester French students in an experimental proficiency-oriented course at the University of Virginia in spring 1987 exhibited surprisingly imaginative and sometimes sophisticated guesses for word meanings in written contexts; many of them then took a greater interest in figuring out their thought processes as they read. Parallel guessing exercises worked equally well with videotape. Clearly, teachers who see the similarities in the processing of spoken and written language find their techniques and exercises for practicing listening and reading more or less doubled; what works for one skill will likely work for the other.

Such are some common trends, generally developed from work in native-language reading and listening. What is the role of the proficiency movement here? Let us start with practical considerations. In a recent study of learners' perceived use of reading strategies, fourth-semester French students were asked to complete the statement "I read a French reading passage because . . ." Choices included "I find the topic interesting or I want to find out how the story ends" and "I want to find out what the author has to say." These two reasons were chosen by about 17.5% of the students; the most popular reason, for an overwhelming 70%, was "it has been assigned" (Barnett). Students seem to be conditioned not to think of a foreign language as a "real" language applicable to the "real" world; we must therefore heed the call from the proficiency movement for realistic activities, realia, original reading and listening texts, and real linguistic tasks. Because of the practical underpinnings of the proficiency guidelines and because of the focus on such real language functions as asking directions or supporting opinions, we are encouraged to bring authentic materials into the classroom. Because of considerations of context and content, we are working more with contextualized activities and are providing context where necessary. We are beginning to ask students to watch and listen to a videotaped conversation to find out more than simply who said what; we want them to see how people greet each other, to hear how formally or informally they address each other, to learn to decode rapidly spoken phrases. We are beginning to adapt our exercises on authentic reading texts to the appropriate level and to ask for realistic responses; novice-level readers can check a train schedule to find out when they can leave for an imagined trip to Berlin; advanced-level readers can decide

where in Madrid they would prefer to live, on the basis of descriptions of city and suburban life. We are integrating the four skill areas in more realistic ways: students are asked to listen to a speech and write an editorial agreeing or disagreeing with it; or read a poem, then listen to the author read it and analyze its possible interpretations.

With the help of a proficiency orientation, we can also recognize different rates of development in the various skill areas; as a result, we no longer prohibit our students from discussing in advanced-level English what they have read in advanced-level Spanish, but might only be able to express in Spanish at an intermediate level. If students do not plan to continue their language study, we permit them to demonstrate their progress in skill areas that are most likely to be useful to them—in getting around Paris, say, or reading *Le monde* or watching a French film.

Analysis of proficiency levels has led to an awareness of the continuing development of learners' skills (Bragger 12). We may, at last, come not only to appreciate that language learning is an ongoing process but also to attest to that fact through serious curriculum revision. At the lower levels, we are seeing reading and listening introduced at the beginning of language study and no longer "saved" until students have a grasp of all the structural and vocabulary items in a text. We are recycling and reviewing grammar better, knowing that learners cannot master at once all aspects of a past tense, for instance. As indicated by the proficiency guidelines, there is no magical moment when a learner totally controls grammar or becomes a polished writer or comprehends everything in a movie. Just as teachers and scholars are perpetually refining their knowledge and skills, so must students in upper-level language courses continue to refine their language abilities in each skill area as well as their cultural awareness and control of grammar while they learn to appreciate and analyze literature.

As Pardee Lowe states, we have moved beyond viewing the ACTFL/ETS Guidelines as a static blueprint for instruction. Not considered prescriptive, the concept of proficiency is, instead, a "comprehensible frame of reference" (Bragger 13) and an "organizing principle" (Higgs; Omaggio): in its eclecticism, proficiency accepts numerous methodologies. With its equal emphasis on language function, context and content, and accuracy, proficiency has helped us break away from a completely structural orientation to language teaching and learning. It has helped us give students reasons for learning a language beyond completing a requirement or finishing a major and allowed us to approach language teaching from a diversity of viewpoints.

Proficiency is also manifesting itself as a new direction in research on second language learning and ac-

quisition. The increased attention being paid to how languages are learned is obvious in such recent publications as VanPatten, Dvorak, and Lee's *Foreign Language Learning*. Within the realm of the receptive skills, researchers recognize that even adept native-language listeners and readers may not be able to transfer their successful comprehension strategies to the foreign language, and they question generally accepted parallels between first- and second-language acquisition. Byrnes suggests that insights gained from proficiency testing can potentially lead us to "fruitful hypotheses" about second language acquisition that we can then test in classroom-centered research ("Second Language" 113). Moving in a direction that is clearly within the confines of the proficiency guidelines, staff members at ACTFL are now completing work on a computer-adaptive test of reading proficiency; a parallel listening test will be undertaken next (Dandonoli). Not to be promulgated as a national reading proficiency test, the completed test is, instead, part of an ongoing research program to improve our understanding of language proficiency as well as to study test development (conversation with Dandonoli, May 1987). Countering the proficiency advocates are arguments that the proficiency guidelines are "teacher-centered rather than learner-centered" (Kramsch 23) and that there should be more research into learner processes. Bernhardt, for example, insists on research studying learners as readers and how they process texts rather than research on the texts they read ("Reading"). Thus, both inside and outside the proficiency movement comes an active clamor for serious research into how we learn a second language. The professional literature of the past two years attests to the impact of the proficiency movement on this charge to the profession.

Evidently, the proficiency movement has provoked questions about all language skill development, learning, and teaching; champions of proficiency, who are among the most vocal questioners, have emphasized our need to improve language courses and have demonstrated our ability to implement such improvements. Attention to proficiency is partly responsible for the acknowledgment that listening to and reading quality language can be the best models of speaking and writing well. Moreover, in acknowledging the importance of comprehension strategies, we will be better able to guide students toward a more analytical approach to language learning and to literary and cultural interpretation. Proficiency may have started from a rather limited concept, but it has been broadened under those same general principles. Although it might seem to be another in a long line of movements that have come and gone, proficiency provides a fertile field for research on second language acquisition; and, unlike the people who usually ride on a bandwagon, proponents as well as opponents of profi-

ciency are calling for further investigation. Much current research is done outside the proficiency framework, yet recognition of the need for vigorous research in all language skill areas and in the second language learning process is a step toward relieving the proficiency movement of its bandwagon label and toward implementing a more effective foreign language pedagogy.

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