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Not Just Lip Service: Systematic Oral Testing in a First-Year College German Program

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A renewed demand for proficiency-oriented foreign language instruction offers us a chance to produce what we have claimed we want and know how to produce: an appreciable number of ordinary Americans reasonably conversant in foreign languages. As standards of proficiency we have now the ACTFL/ETS *Provisional Proficiency Guidelines*; and for oral proficiency rating there is the well-developed ILR model of the oral interview. What remains is application: 1) the earnest acceptance of practical proficiency as the primary goal of basic instruction; 2) the adoption of the *Guidelines* throughout the profession; and 3)—in my view the central issue—the adaptation of *Guidelines* and testing technique to programs which serve the ordinary student.

I describe here a large introductory college German course which was designed with proficiency as its "organizing principle." Since the autumn of 1980 the dominant feature of first-year German at Portland State University has been regular, frequent individual oral testing along ILR/ACTFL/ETS lines, with oral test performance the greatest single factor in grading. In the past four years about five thousand oral tests have been administered, each lasting about ten minutes. Students and staff consider the course an outstanding success, and proficiency-oriented instruction and evaluation have been or will soon be introduced into intermediate and advanced courses. The heavy investment of time and energy in oral testing has yielded other rewards and challenges. Chief among the benefits is the compensatory reduction in the labor demanded by the administration of conventional written tests.

Genesis

While the introduction of proficiency instruction and oral testing in our first-year German course was effected rapidly, it was not a pedagogical caprice. For some time we had doubted that our students were actually acquiring true practical proficiency. As a first step we adopted a text which seemed to promise greater realism and livelier classes,² and we agreed to entertain major changes in the program.

During the summer of 1980, already somewhat familiar with what we then knew simply as "FSI" standards and testing procedures, we debated how they might be made the core of the first-year course, both as an evaluative tool and as an incentive to proficiency acquisition. The ideal was clear: regular individual oral testing, with commensurate effect on grading. But the construction, administration, and weighting of the tests

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