

from Professor 84 (ADE/ADFL)

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TOWARD REALISTIC OBJECTIVES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

WHEN I first came to the United States some twenty years ago and found myself about to teach in a foreign language department, I was amazed to discover that in two years, or four semesters, I was expected to teach the German language to large numbers of beginners—some thirty students a class—to the point where they could read and discuss authors such as Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht, even Goethe. It was the heyday of the audio-lingual method, and my chairman told me to cast aside my old-fashioned English methods of teaching by translation and learn the new American way. Sitting there with the fourth-semester text of Brecht's *Leben des Galilei* in my hand, in my first encounter with an American chair of a foreign language department, I came face to face with that great miracle of American foreign language education: the conversion of absolute beginners into literate speakers, writers, and readers—in two years flat. "Well," I thought, "this audio-lingual method must be quite something."

"All these students," I said to him, "are they going on with German?" "No, no," he said, smiling indulgently, "they're fulfilling the foreign language requirement." And so I heard for the first time the magic words that have sustained me for twenty years in the classrooms of New York City: the foreign language requirement. Ask not for its objectives. It is, or has often seemed to be, an end in itself.

These remarks are in no way intended to belittle the concept of a foreign language requirement. I have come in my twenty years here to have a healthy respect for it—not least as a survival mechanism for foreign language faculty. No mean objective. I know that without it I would probably never have got a job in New York City in the first place. I certainly would not now be chairing a German department (small as it is) at Hunter College if Hunter had in the sixties, along with many other institutions, dropped the requirement. But Hunter did not drop it, and some nine hundred people fulfill it every year—whatever that means.

Some of us at Hunter have been trying in the past two or three years to work out exactly what it does mean, and what it ought to mean, both for the students to whom it is an end—an end at any rate of their formal foreign language training—and for those who go on to study language further. Hunter kept a four-semester, twelve-credit requirement, at a price, however, in that we teach only three hours a week, whereas other colleges that abandoned the requirement were able to hold to a more realistic number of hours for beginning language. We have the same ostensible goal as most foreign language programs—all-around proficiency in reading, speaking, writing, and aural comprehension.

Dorothy James

There is, we have discovered, variety in teaching method. Some departments have a limited number of "audiovisual tracks," for example, and many individual teachers try to incorporate into their classwork elements of the audio-lingual method or the more recently developed functional-notional method; but the organizing principle behind the first two terms of the language sequence across the college is that of the traditional American foreign language textbook, namely, the systematic covering of grammar, working through the tenses, working through the cases, working through the parts of speech, and so on, in one year. The language of instruction, when "teaching the grammar," is almost always English, and most teachers seem to try hard to fit oral work in the target language as well as reading and translation practice in and around their grammar teaching. The great pressure, felt by some teachers as a burden and by some as a necessary discipline, is "to finish the book." The one tangible goal, therefore, of the first two terms of six credits of language instruction is to cover all or most of the basic grammar. Most instructors cannot say with certainty whether they teach grammar with their sights set more particularly on reading, writing, speaking, or comprehension. They know that theoretically they are working toward "proficiency" in all four areas, but they do not know or they cannot define what precisely proficiency means.

The instructors seem to accept that the courses in the second year of the sequence are firmly based, organizationally, in reading. Students, in fact, sometimes express surprise and even shock at the discovery, coming as they do straight from their grammatically structured textbooks. The books to be "covered" in the second year are usually literary works of graduated difficulty that constitute the material around which the teacher fits grammar review and conversation. The last text of the fourth semester is usually the most difficult, so that, if pressed to define a goal for the second year of the foreign language requirement, one might say that the student must be able to read and understand a fairly

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advanced literary text and to talk and write about it in the target language.

Because almost all advanced courses at Hunter are literature courses, this would seem a reasonable goal. Indeed, it is clear that the four-term foreign language requirement sequence was long ago designed precisely and quite properly to equip students to take advanced courses in literature. Since, however, our examination of student enrollment indicates that the majority of students in the foreign language requirement courses do not in fact go on to take advanced literature courses, we were obliged to ask the question, is the formerly eminently reasonable goal so reasonable any more? A further disturbing question: is this goal achieved? We frequently encountered the complaint that those students who completed the foreign language requirement and who did enter advanced literature courses often found themselves completely out of their depth, not least because, New York City being what it is, they were sitting side by side with native speakers of the target language.

We seemed to be dealing at Hunter with a sort of unfocused dissatisfaction with the status quo, and I suspect that this dissatisfaction is fairly typical of the profession as a whole. It is not that we are dissatisfied with our teaching methods as such (some of us think that we do a rather good job in the classroom and that the teacher is in any case more important than the method). Nor are we necessarily dissatisfied with our goals: many of us are perfectly happy to teach students to discuss literature—hardly an unworthy goal for a humanist. Our real problem is that we are being asked to do the impossible under impossible conditions.

Take the goal of "proficiency" in all the skills, including speaking. We looked at the levels of proficiency aimed at in a "real" language school—the School of Language Studies of the Foreign Service Institute: to bring a motivated student with superior aptitude for language learning to the level where in speaking he or she can satisfy most survival needs and limited social demands in the spoken language; if that language is French, Spanish, Italian, or Portuguese, the FSI expects to train the student in classes of one to eight students for five hours a day for five days a week for eight weeks—a total of 240 hours. German and Urdu take longer; Hebrew, Russian, and Polish twice as long, to get not quite as far; Chinese takes at least three times as long. The FSI expects the students at this stage to have a limited vocabulary and to make frequent grammatical errors. We, at Hunter, in most of the named languages attempt in seventy-seven class hours (i.e., 2 semesters of 14 weeks with 3 class sections of 55 minutes: a total of 77 teaching hours, including examination time) to take our students through the entire grammar of a new language and in seventy-seven more class hours to bring them to the point where they can read and discuss literature (modern and classical) in the target language in classes where they are supposedly evaluated on

the same scale as native speakers. The enormity of this ambition is compounded by two factors:

1. Our students can by no means be said to have superior aptitude for language learning. Why indeed should every student required to take language as part of a liberal arts general education have this? At Hunter, as elsewhere, moreover, a great many students come to college needing courses to strengthen their English language skills.
2. The class size in our elementary courses far exceeds the one-to-eight level. Keeping down the class size to twenty to twenty-five in courses required of hundreds of students is a major budgetary problem.

Our interest, then, in the ACTFL experiments with introducing proficiency guidelines was in reducing the nightmare of always trying to do something that simply couldn't be done and of attempting to do a more honest job of something that could be done.

We are beginning to do this, and I will try to set out some of the problems and pitfalls—as well as the possibilities—in what we are doing, in the hope that this may help some of you who are thinking of moving in this direction in your own departments.

We are working on oral-proficiency testing, that is, training people to test and adapting elementary and advanced sequences so that some students may move through the levels from novice to advanced or even superior in speaking proficiency (i.e., 0 to 3 on the foreign service scale) in the time they spend at Hunter. We are focusing on oral-proficiency testing for various reasons.

First of all, it is perhaps the most clear-cut way of testing genuine mastery of the language as opposed to paper learning. Certainly, in my opinion, the old foreign service interview is by far the best thought-out and proven method of testing proficiency that we have. All the ACTFL guidelines are provisional, but the guidelines for oral proficiency are by far the least provisional. The method of testing, the interview itself, is the most clearly worked out, most reliable system of testing I have ever encountered. It is probably the hardest to learn, the hardest to implement, the most time-consuming, the most expensive, and far and away the most intellectually interesting. I had never in my life been in the least interested in testing until I encountered it. It turns testing from a necessary evil into a pivotal departmental activity.

Second, the oral rating scale provides what we sorely need—a realistic goal for the foreign language requirement and for advanced courses based on it. Let me try to explain. Tests seem to indicate that a rating of intermediate high (1+) is a reasonable exit requirement, a reasonable goal, for the sequence of courses—four semesters—of our foreign language requirement. We have just run a yearlong pilot program in German, an intensive course of twelve credits.¹ The ten students

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who completed the course came out with oral ratings of intermediate mid or high. This does not mean that these students have been taught only to speak. It means that they have gone through all the grammar as usual. The difference is that this time we know that they can satisfy most survival needs and limited social demands; they can narrate current activities in the present tense and they can intermittently use the present and past tenses. They converse mainly in short discrete utterances, but with errors. Their basic word order is under control, but with errors. That is a realistic expectation for an average Hunter student who has worked in a relatively small class for the length of time assigned to the foreign language requirement. These students, even if they do not go on with the language, have acquired some survival abilities; and, more important, because they have been tested by interview, they know that they can sustain one-to-one conversations in a foreign language. This is a surprisingly great incentive to further study.

What of the students who do go on? The oral intermediate high students have learned complex grammar. They do not use it. They cannot, we know from the testing method, do certain things; for example, they cannot sustain coherent structures in longer utterances, they cannot support opinions, they cannot hypothesize. They cannot (to be brutal about it) discuss literature. They need, then, after the foreign language requirement, a series of advanced courses with the focus still on language skills and not just general conversation courses in which one is meant to pick up speaking ability as we imagine one does abroad, by osmosis; rather, they need courses that offer systematic practice in precisely those things that an intermediate high cannot do.

As soon as I say this, of course, you will see some of the problems in getting faculty to accept the idea of oral-proficiency standards as guidelines throughout a departmental program. Immediately, accusations of lowering standards are leveled, of undercutting the major, of diminishing the importance of literature. All this is in fact sheer nonsense, but it is seriously felt and has to be seriously countered. In my experience anyone contemplating introducing guidelines to a department in this way needs to stress from the beginning certain things that the oral-proficiency interview does not do (and you will find you will have to repeat them again and again):

1. *It does not imply an emphasis on oral skills to the detriment of reading and writing skills.* It places oral skills, with reading and writing, in the category of skills to be tested. (This, rather amazingly, is an innovation in the teaching of foreign language in the United States. In European countries, from high schools on up, some form of oral testing is a routine part of foreign language teaching.) It recognizes that oral skills lag behind the paper mastery of grammar, and it *works with this problem.*

2. *It does not dictate teaching method.* On the contrary, it encourages experimentation with teaching methods by providing a reliable way of testing the efficacy of various methods in reaching various goals. There is a tendency to assume that it necessarily encourages the "communicative" method. This, in my opinion, is not necessarily so, certainly not if "communicative" implies a de-emphasis of grammar teaching and learning.
3. *It does not imply such a de-emphasis.* On the contrary, it appeals to die-hard grammarians, among whom I count myself.

Recent experiments at Middlebury College were reported by Roberto Véguez at the April 1984 Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. They show quite fascinatingly that students who go abroad for a year come back chattering nineteen to the dozen in the foreign language with every expectation of making high scores on the oral interview; they have acquired large vocabularies, but their mastery of grammar is frequently inadequate. In fact they tend to score not higher than 2 or 2+; they run a grave risk of becoming terminal 2+'s with fossilized mistakes. If anything, then, oral proficiency testing underscores the absolute necessity of teaching beginners correct grammar and insisting that they master it before they set foot in the foreign country if they are to aspire to higher levels on the rating scale. This point should be much stressed to those who fear that an insistence on oral proficiency means a lowering of standards. Oral proficiency does not mean mindless ungrammatical chatter. It means genuine and careful mastery of the structures and vocabulary of the language. It is precisely what a student needs to engage in intellectual discourse in a foreign tongue.

There is a quite different antagonism to the idea, and it is harder to counter because it is rarely openly stated by anyone. This is the antagonism of those faculty members who fear that either their own mastery of the language or their own teaching will not stand up under the strain of rigorous testing. Here I can only suggest that one go carefully and stress the value of the ratings as an organizational tool, underplaying their quite real importance as a measure of teaching competence. The fact of the matter remains, however, that if slight pressure leads some instructors to brush up their language and/or their teaching, the students will be better off.

Problems arise in dealing with the harder languages. When a straight four-course sequence has undefined goals, the four courses of French look to the students much like four courses of Chinese. If, however, you institute an exit requirement of intermediate high for the foreign language requirement and it takes a student three times as long to achieve that in Chinese as in French, then the "harder languages" have a problem. Needless to say, they have had this problem all along, but the testing system brings it (like many other things) out into the open. Again, one has to go carefully and

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consult with these faculty members every step of the way, making it clear that the exit requirement has to be realistically adapted to each language.

There are other problems that I have not mentioned and have not time to mention. I can only allude in passing to the enormous practical and financial problem of actually implementing oral testing of individual students across the board for hundreds of students. You have to start small—with sample classes and individual teachers. You have to rely on the dedication and interest of your faculty and on their willingness to put in extra time.

Claire Gaudiani has spoken about the problem of motivating middle-aged tenured professors whose dreams have not come true. Well, I am a middle-aged tenured professor, and, believe me, few of my dreams have come true. I would like to tell you what drew me out of the library and the nineteenth century into this "movement" of oral-proficiency testing. It was the interview itself. It is aesthetically pleasing and intellectually challenging. You have to juggle so many things in your head at once as you do it—the possible levels, the functions, the grammatical structures—all the while listening, as we say in the game, below the surface, making judgments and leading your candidate in precise directions while appearing to be casual and random. It is very difficult, but it is a lot of fun. It appeals to game-playing intellectuals, which many of the best academics are. It is a marvelous tool for galvanizing into action senior tenured faculty who would normally bypass dis-

cussions of foreign language pedagogy with a yawn. You will find us over coffee engaged in enthusiastic debates on the levels of ability of beginning students whose problems we have not seriously considered since we were beginning to learn foreign languages ourselves.

I do not wish to exceed the bounds of "truth in packaging," but I doubt whether there will ever be a more amusing way of involving intelligent people in the reform of language teaching.

NOTE

¹This course was taught by Claudia Stoeffler, graduate assistant in the German department, who has worked on our proficiency project from its beginnings and who deserves much credit for its progress to date. The students were tested by E. F. Hoffmann and me. Oral testing works better when testers have not taught their candidates.

WORKS CITED

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