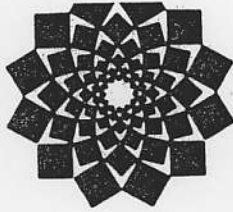


# Teaching for Proficiency, the Organizing Principle

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# Introduction

## Language Teaching and the Quest for the Holy Grail

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### A Perspective on Methodology

Western cultures have shared a fantasy that the unknowable can be known, the uncontrollable controlled, if only we can come to possess the key. The ancient Hebrews depended on the Urim and Thummim to divine the will of God and thereby know the unknowable. Medieval alchemists were convinced that to control the uncontrollable, they needed only to find the philosophers' stone that would change base metals into gold. Who knows how many good and gentle knights came to grief in their search for the Holy Grail, which would have made them pure and, hence, privy to the Secrets of the Universe?

For our generation, the analog of these quests is our desperately wistful search for the "key" to teaching foreign languages. We have been motivated, I believe, by two compelling forces: the desire to welcome our students into the multicultural/multilingual world that we as language teachers inhabit, and the conviction that there is a right way to accomplish this. By using "the right stuff in the right way," we are certain, our students not only will learn foreign languages but also will enjoy the process.

We have sought our own Holy Grail in a variety of areas, principally in theories of language and/or learning, and we have then developed or

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had imposed on us methodologies presumably derived from these. The one observation that to me seems true for all of the theories and their accompanying methodologies is that each has identified some single aspect of language or of language learning and has assumed either explicitly or implicitly that all of human language or language learning can be accounted for by that one aspect. Let us look briefly at just two instances of this.

As we will see in more detail in Chapter 1, the grammar-translation method dominated foreign-language instruction in the United States for more than a century. It was based on a rationalist/universalist linguistic theory, fully amenable to the premise that all natural languages were lexical analogs of each other. Its methodology assumed the validity of mental exercise and its transferability into other cognitive areas. It was ultimately abandoned on practical grounds, *not* because we discovered that it is bad or counterproductive to know the grammar of a language and to be able to translate into and out of it, but because other needs intuitively associated with knowing a language remained conspicuously unsatisfied. The method promised grammar and translation. It delivered grammar and translation.

Foreign-language teaching in postwar America faced a triple threat: the marriage of a linguistic theory (structuralism) to a learning theory (behaviorism), and the issue of this union, the audiolingual method. At last all the questions were answered. Structuralist linguistics showed us that "A language is a complex system of *habits*" (Hockett, 3, p. 137). We understood its lexicon to be a collection or arbitrary and conventional items; its grammar to be a statement of the permissible arrangements into which these items fit. Carroll (1) once defined a sentence as "...one or more form classes arranged in any of certain sequence patterns found in a given language" (p. 37). Speech and language were viewed as virtually synonymous, although "the relationship between writing and language [was] close" (Hockett, 3, p. 4). Behaviorism viewed learning as systems of habits acquired and strengthened through repetition and positive reinforcement. The audiolingual method was inevitable: we knew what language was; we knew how it was learned. How to teach it could not have been more obvious. And it didn't work. *Not* because speech is not the primary manifestation of language or because students could not master the patterns of the new language, but because, again, after mastering them, students could not *use* the language as they had expected to. The method promised habits. It delivered habits.

We may never know again as much as we knew during the audiolingual period. No other methodology has since enjoyed such near universal acceptance; no other theories of language or learning have successfully replaced structuralism or behaviorism in the sense of holding the same unchallenged sway. Later models have expanded our understanding and enabled us to ask better questions about language and learning, but no

"new paradigm" has emerged to unite us in our approach to understanding our universe.

In linguistics, structuralism gave way to the "Standard Theory" and then to the "Extended Standard Theory," while case grammar, generative semantics, and other models competed for our affections, with none recommending itself as a basis for a new pedagogical grammar. To the extent that linguistic theories have addressed language acquisition, they have done so with black boxes that accept natural language as input and produce grammars as output, but through the mediation of unknown processes.

In learning theory, cognitive psychology has largely supplanted behaviorism, but the implications for language learning remain unclear. A major controversy involves accounting for the decline in second-language learning/acquisition potential associated with puberty. Arguing from the cognitivist position, for example, Krashen (4) hypothesized that this decline may be due to the onset of "formal operations," the highest stage in the Piagetian developmental model. Once that stage is reached natural acquisition may be impossible. In his later writings, however, Krashen (5) leads us to infer that under stable environmental conditions, adult L2 acquisition *is* possible, that it differs little if at all from child L1 acquisition, and that indeed *only* acquisition, i.e., not learning, can account for spontaneous and accurate use of L2.

Schumann (6), on the other hand, suggests that the major block to adult L2 learning is affective rather than cognitive, that it is "...only social and psychological development that creates psychological distance between the learner and the speakers of the target language." The major inhibiting affective factors are psychological and social distance, and ego permeability. When these distancing factors are present, neither learning nor acquisition is likely. However, "the affective argument assumes that when the learner has emphatic capacity, and motivation and attitudes which are favorable both to the target language community and to language learning itself, the psychological distance between the learner and the TL group will be minimal and the learner's cognitive processes will automatically function to produce language acquisition" (p. 108). From these two positions we conclude that cognitive development either inhibits or enhances language learning.

Intimately related to the above issues is the radical dichotomy of language learning versus language acquisition (discussed much more fully in Chapter 2). Granting that acquisition is the goal of instruction, the mere existence of this dichotomy places the profession in a methodological dilemma, for no "one-solution mentality" could possibly accommodate the mutually exclusive methodologies implied by these two competing positions: students either should learn *about* the target language in order to facilitate their spontaneous and accurate use of it, or they should not.

Another aspect of learning theory that complicates the picture is the professional literature about identifying and teaching to the preferred



learning styles of our students. Little if any of this literature seriously considers the preferred teaching style of instructors. In general, teachers are more effective when they are confident about their own abilities and feel free to capitalize on their perceived strengths while minimizing their weaknesses. A native-speaking instructor of the target language usually feels more comfortable giving copious examples of the language, spontaneously creating them in response to a given situation. Nonnatives, however, usually feel more secure explaining material already presented in text materials. The affective environment in the classroom may well be more influenced by a teacher's feeling of confidence than by externally imposed considerations of methodology.

The theoretical heterogeneity in linguistic and learning theories has resulted in a profusion of postaudiolingual "methods" or "approaches": cognitive code learning, the Natural Approach, Silent Way, Suggestopedia, Total Physical Response, counseling-learning, the input hypothesis, to name a representative sample. Each claims to be the right way, yet each is distinct from the others. So much is on the methodological menu that our professional vocabulary now includes "the eclectic method." Krashen has often called the latter term "an intellectual obscenity," perhaps thereby perpetuating "Holy Grailism" by implicitly supporting the notion that there must be one single method that is right under all circumstances at all instructional levels. We will suggest below that "the eclectic method" may just be an ill-named, inchoate recognition of an underlying reality in foreign-language teaching.

Clearly, the jury is still out on the competing methodologies that have emerged in the postaudiolingual period. But experience suggests that to the extent that they fixate on one aspect of "language knowing," they, too, will have to be adapted, integrated with others, or abandoned.

### Proficiency: The Organizing Principle

The fallacy that there is one right way to teach languages, that the right key will unlock the Secrets of the Universe, is revealed when "proficiency as the organizing principle" is understood conceptually. Higgs and Clifford (2) point out that a student cannot simply be declared "proficient" or "competent." He is proficient at something; competent to use the language to some purpose. In the same sense, a "method" cannot be declared "right" or "best." It must be right for something, the best way to accomplish some set of tasks. "Single method-ism" would be possible only if acquiring native or near-native proficiency in a foreign language involved learning a single type of skill. Insights gained over more than thirty years of proficiency testing show that such is not the case.

The cornerstone of the proficiency movement, I believe, is the "Functional Trisection" (see page 36 in this volume). Here we see clearly

the necessary interrelationship of function, content, and accuracy, and are able to appreciate the different kinds of skills that contribute to proficiency ratings at different levels. The three factors of function, content, and accuracy are not hierarchically arranged: usually insufficiencies in any of the three areas keep a candidate from the next higher rating.

If we accept the premise of Chapter 1, that the ACTFL proficiency guidelines are a "stepladder for learning" representing "a graduated sequence of steps that can be used to structure a foreign-language program," we must recognize that the proficiency movement is not promoting a method in the "one-solution mentality" sense. Every new level in the ACTFL or ILR level definitions represents a new constellation or interrelationship of the factors of content, function, and accuracy. In addition, the relative contribution of specific language subskills—pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and sociolinguistic appropriateness—changes from level to level. (See Higgs and Clifford 2, pp. 68ff for a description of the relative contribution model.) When the relative contributions of the subskills are graphed, they peak at different levels. For example, sociocultural variables, which play a minimal role at the low end of the rating scale, are crucial to attaining an ILR rating of 4. The peak of the sociolinguistic curve, then, is around the ILR 4 level. (See Figure 1 on the next page.)

The relative contribution model has serious implications for any discussion of methodology. The Novice Level (ILR 0), for example, implicitly recognizes "enumeration of memorized material" as the primary function that can be expressed. Content is concerned with common, isolable semantic groups of lexical items, such as basic objects, weekdays, months, meals, colors, articles of clothing, family members, and greetings. Accuracy is limited to intelligibility. Not surprisingly, at the Novice Level, the vocabulary and pronunciation curves of the relative contribution model are near their peak. If this level is the first step up the proficiency ladder, debate over the merits and liabilities of the grammatical versus the functional/notional syllabus are moot. What is needed is a lexical syllabus. Nothing else could reasonably be asked to pick up the students where they are and move them onward. This does not imply that foreign-language materials and methods should be reconceptualized uniquely in terms of a lexical syllabus. But it does imply that at the most elementary level the lexicon must be the focus of instruction. The methodology must reflect this.

At the Intermediate Level (ILR 1), relationships shift. The student can now create with the language. He can ask and answer basic, concrete questions in areas of immediate personal need. He makes many errors in both pronunciation and grammar but is intelligible to a native speaker of the target language who is accustomed to dealing with nonnatives. This means that the interlocutor must contribute a great deal to a conversation. He must be a virtuoso listener and must be able to use "foreigner talk"

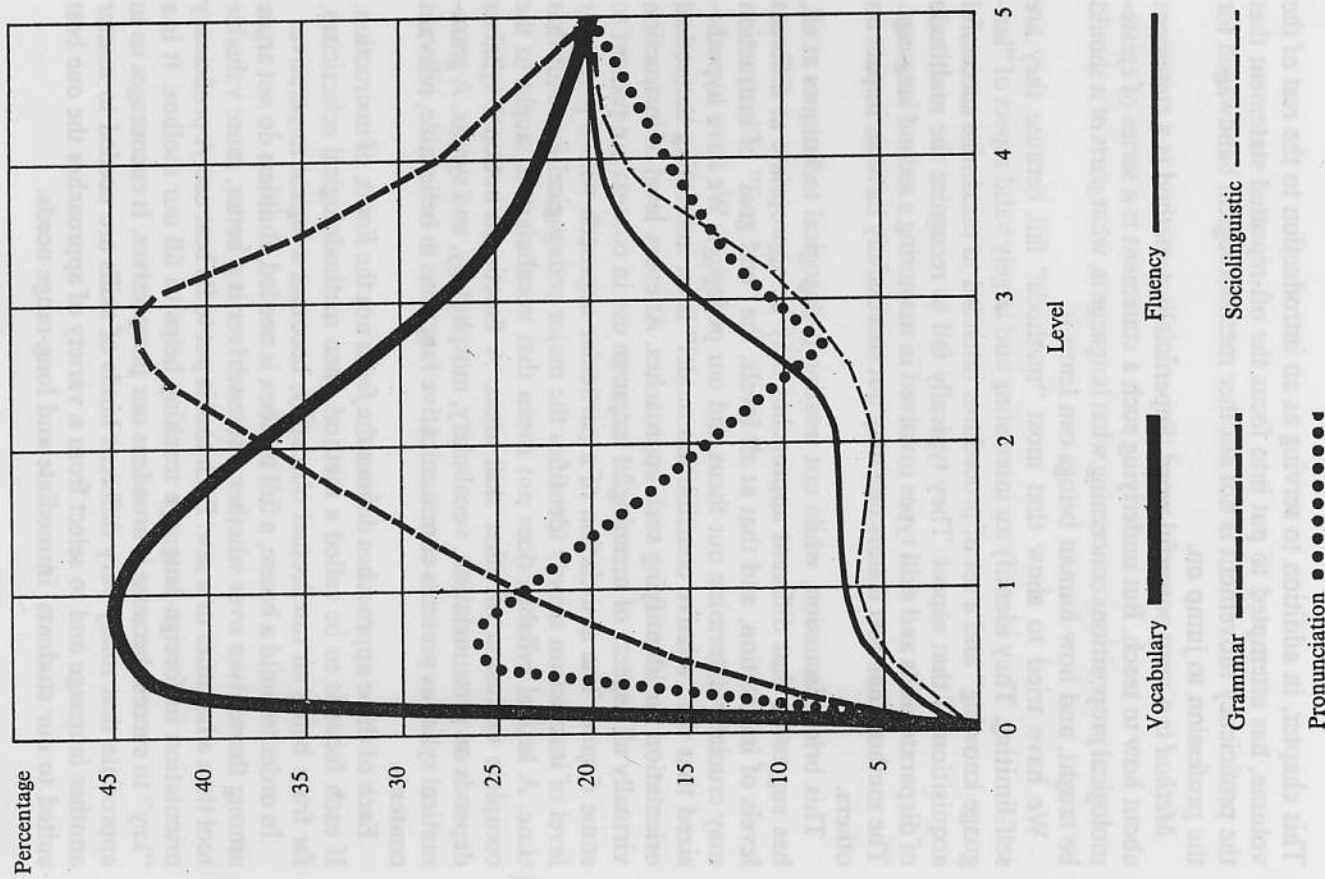


Figure 1. Hypothesized Relative Contribution Model

successfully and appropriately. In classrooms at this level, any of the "input methods" (see, for example, Krashen 5, especially pp. 20-30 and 137-46) is appropriate as the primary methodological focus. Vocabulary and pronunciation curves are still at or very near their peaks and thus demand major instructional attention. Major insights from the literature on functional/notional syllabuses also become applicable at this stage. Proficiency theory predicts that at this level, the grammar curve, though still well below its peak, is ascending sharply, and although a grammatical syllabus as such is contraindicated, even at this level grammatical accuracy is ignored only at great peril.

The Advanced Plus/Superior (ILR 2+/3) borderline finds the grammar curve at its peak. This means that all the basic grammatical structures of the target language must be under control for the candidate to manifest successfully the linguistic functions and content associated with this level: hypothesizing, supporting opinions, dealing with abstractions. Since the grammar curve nears its peak at the 2+ level, proficiency theory predicts that a grammatical syllabus is not only defensible, it is indispensable.

It is not popular these days to stress the need for grammatical accuracy in foreign-language classes. But it is vital to recognize that once a fairly elementary level is surpassed, the grammar itself communicates considerable meaning. In English, it makes a great deal of difference to say, "If you and I are friends, we can discuss this openly" when you mean "If you and I were friends, we could discuss this openly." In Spanish, *cuando nieva* (when it snows) does not mean *cuando nieve* (when it snows). The lexicon alone will not provide for these communicative needs. It is for this reason that attention to grammatical accuracy is an important motivating factor throughout the instructional process. Granted, when one is forced to function at the lexical level, grammatical niceties are a luxury and are perhaps accounted for in the lexico-situational context. While the student who aspires to nothing beyond Intermediate- or Advanced-Level communication will not be held back for having accuracy encouraged from the beginning, it is scarcely fair to lead the serious students along, encouraging them to talk like Tarzan and then saying that future progress is unlikely if not impossible until they get their grammatical act together. Postponing linguistic accuracy is an approach that promises a terminal profile, as defined in Higgs and Clifford (2).

It is perhaps not surprising that a rating of Advanced Plus (ILR 2+) rather than Superior (ILR 3) represents a kind of instructional ceiling. The social and linguistic skills necessary to function at the latter level require that the language be lived, as well as learned. It is no longer sufficient to "survive," to "make oneself understood." At the Superior Level, the nonnative can function socially and professionally in the target language. Krashen's (5) observation that the goal of classroom instruction is to prepare the student to comprehend the language in the outside world is certainly valid.



## Summary

This chapter, in addition to serving as an introduction to the rest of the volume, has attempted to put into focus the oft-repeated statement that the proficiency movement is not another methodological bandwagon for the profession to jump on.

*Method* is a very powerful word. Superficially a method is a statement about how to teach. But underlying such a statement is a series of epistemological propositions concerning what language is, what parts of it should be taught, and how human beings can learn it.

We have tried to show that most "methods" fail because they are self-limiting. They identify an interesting and largely valid aspect of "language knowing" and a set of procedures intended to maximize successful acquisition of that aspect. They typically fail to recognize the multitude of disparate skills and skill types involved in mastering a second language. The method that best fosters one may not successfully have an impact on others.

This brief discussion, while not treating pedagogical techniques at all, has suggested that different approaches may be appropriate at different levels of instruction, and that at all levels, the "end goal" of instruction may crucially determine our focus and our pedagogy. We have hypothesized that the "relative contribution model" is an interesting theoretical orientation for identifying such approaches. At every level of instruction virtually all aspects of meaningful language use in context are present to some degree. The association of a particular approach with a particular level of instruction simply identifies the major pedagogical focus for that time. A lexical syllabus does not mean that vocabulary is taught to the complete exclusion of other skill areas. A functional/notional syllabus depends on pronunciation, vocabulary, morphology, and syntax. A grammatical syllabus presents communicative functions in believable, relevant contexts.

Each of these approaches defines the *focus* not the *limits*, of instruction. If each focus is to be called a method, then methodological eclecticism, far from being an intellectual obscenity, becomes a logical imperative.

In order to build a house, a full toolbox is needed. Builders do not argue among themselves over whether a screwdriver is a better, more valuable tool than a hammer or a saw. Each tool is put to its best use. A proficiency orientation in foreign-language teaching helps us fill our toolbox. It is a "key" to success because it broadens our perspectives. It encourages us to appreciate that many very different kinds of skills are needed to master another language and to select from a variety of approaches the one best suited to our students' immediate and long-range needs.

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