

PROFICIENCY-BASED CURRICULA: THE VIEW FROM THE HILL

FOR my title I have stolen a metaphor from Pardee Lowe's article "The ILR Proficiency Scale as a Synthesizing Research Principle: The View from the Mountain." If Lowe surveys the current state of proficiency testing from the mountain, an exalted status he has achieved through his tireless labors on behalf of our profession, then those of us who chair departments and have embraced the proficiency movement probably can claim a view from the foothills, with our students scrambling about on the valley floor and our uninitiated colleagues plowing the land on the piedmont in between.

I propose to review some issues that keep coming up wherever language teachers gather and to assess the contributions that the proficiency movement has been making to this profession. I also hope to show why it is important that language department administrators be concerned with what Pardee Lowe and his fellow pioneers have been telling us.

Thomas Cooper recently outlined the ten concerns about foreign language teaching and learning most frequently voiced by our colleagues across the country. These concerns are testing and evaluation, promoting and maintaining interest in foreign language study, language learning theory, developing students' oral proficiency, program development, dealing with multilevel classes, integrating instructional aids into the classroom routine, teaching culture, the student as learner, and techniques for including partner and group work in instruction. To this list of ten, one could easily add questions of department morale, professional self-respect, the public image of the language teacher, and, certainly not least, faculty development. From my biased perch on the hill, it seems to me that students' oral proficiency lies at the very heart of the matter and speaks directly to the other nine concerns.

The current literature teems with the now self-evident assertions that students learn to speak by speaking, to read by reading, to understand by listening, and to write by writing. Nelson Brooks's immortal admonition, "Never lose sight of the individual" (210), was never truer than it is today, for it would have us place the student squarely in the middle of the learning process. Too often in the past we have subordinated learning to lecture and the person to the paradigm. We have created the nearly universal public impression that the subjects we love to teach cannot be learned. Now, how can the proficiency movement improve this melancholy state of affairs? First of all, teaching to proficiency guidelines is student-centered teaching. It is personalized and contextualized, and it replaces the student as observer with the student as performer and learner. Students learn to talk about themselves, their families, their lives, their plans, their

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problems. They do so within believable situational contexts that require skillful use of grammar and vocabulary to perform definite functions. Teaching for proficiency virtually demands partner and group work, because we are training our students to survive in real-life situations. Students play out roles in class that they will be called on to assume, not just in the oral interview, but on the street, at the train station, in the coffee house of another country. This is teaching for maximum flexibility in practical, tangible situations. It not only permits but requires student interaction. Students speaking in pairs or small groups under carefully controlled linguistic circumstances, learning how to stretch toward communication, acquiring strategies of verbal interaction, negotiation, persuasion—that is all central to the proficiency ideal. Does this sound possible at a time when the recitation of rules still passes for language learning in many a foreign language classroom? Let's just say that in an age when Latin is staging a comeback taught as a spoken language, anything is possible.

Because of its basis in everyday situations, teaching for proficiency includes a strong small-*'c'* culture component. Situations are practiced in the classroom as if they were located abroad. Students must learn about others' eating habits if they are supposed to compose a shopping list for a party and fetch the items from the store. They have to know how to judge quantity, too: European or Asian storekeepers do not easily understand inches and ounces. Students must also be aware of taboos and other culture-specific matters such as holidays. This is in every respect a global approach to language study, a way of organizing the reality of other cultures and organizing our curricula around the imperatives of those cultures and languages rather than our own.

If we consider the integration of instructional aids into the classroom routine, we now finally have something other than the teacher's grammar lecture to capture on videotape. We can simulate culture-specific situations from embarrassing moments at the butcher shop to eyewitness reports of accidents or robberies, all requiring that the students create with language. Student-written and -acted soap operas or game shows extend language

The author is Professor of German and Chair of the Department of Modern Languages at Linfield College. This article is based on a paper presented at ADFL Seminar West, June 1985, in Seattle.

learning and practice into the all too real world of television. Immediate playback enables students to critique a range of matters from situational authenticity to non-verbal communication to vocabulary—and, central to the whole shebang, to grammar, the skeleton that holds everything together. The phrase *instructional aids* also includes the use of computers and interactive video, and many of our colleagues with training in oral proficiency testing are devising proficiency-based programs for their students' lab use.¹

Having addressed six of Thomas Cooper's concerns, let me now turn to testing and evaluation, language learning theory, program development, and, finally, promoting and maintaining interest in foreign language study. In a very real sense, testing and evaluation are the most vital part of the proficiency movement. Of course, the real tests lie in on-site performance, but we can say that oral tests in school or college provide students an excellent reason to study—assuming that grades are assigned accordingly. As we observe over and over, students study what will be tested and tend not to study what will not be tested. In answer to the eternal question "What will be on the test?" they should hear, "Everything"—for the proficiency ratings are global, and every aspect of an examinee's language contributes to his or her rating. By extension, students also quickly see that every bit of their classwork can improve their test performance. When this realization combines with their respect for ratings based on some integrative, precisely defined, and internationally recognized scale, they involve themselves eagerly in classroom work—but only if we do our job.

The extensive use of situational teaching in the proficiency-based classroom should not be understood to mean that grammar is at all neglected. I mention this because objections to teaching functions and notions, or teaching communicative competence, too often call to mind grammar-anemic classrooms in which students learn a quick-fix me-Tarzan-you-Jane sort of language that steers them toward a dead end, a terminal profile that virtually guarantees that they will never surpass the Intermediate level (or, in K-12, perhaps even a Novice-High). Proficiency ratings take into account not only function and content but also accuracy, the grammatical third leg without which the system simply cannot stand. Each level of the proficiency scale is thus firmly supported by an active, functional knowledge of grammar without which no further real progress in language learning takes place.

Here, of course, we are approaching theory: Do we simply flood the classroom with real language, trusting that the students will follow the ways of the structurally righteous (Krashen)? Or, realizing with Theodore Higgs and Heidi Byrnes that language majors at the end of their senior years have been exposed in the classroom to the equivalent of fewer than forty days abroad, do we maintain rigorous grammar training within a highly contextualized and personalized environment? Whatever

theoretical winds we set our sails to, we find that the criteria for student performance are the same and are those detailed in the *ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines*. (My remarks deal mainly with oral proficiency, because it has so far been the most extensively taught and tested. The guidelines include performance criteria for reading, writing, and cultural knowledge as well, skill areas that are by no means being neglected in the national push toward speaking competence.)

It will be apparent by now that proficiency standards are immensely important to program development, to the establishment of reasonable goals at each stage in an entire curriculum. We can design courses to fit the performance guidelines, and we should let students know exactly what we are doing at all times. Thus we might tell second-year students of French or third-year students of Russian: "Rather than just covering chapters 7-12 this term, you'll be practicing expressing facts, giving instructions, describing, reporting, and telling about past, present, and future activities. You'll learn to talk about your family, your interests, work, travel, and so on, in such a way that you are understood by a native speaker not used to dealing with foreigners. That's level 2, ACTFL-ETS Advanced, not far from what the average senior language major attains in this country after four years of study."

If this forecast sounds nebulous, there have been impressive results. In the fall of 1984 Earl Rickerson described a curriculum for Mandarin Chinese developed in 1974 according to foreign service proficiency guidelines and intended for use by all US government agencies. It was, he says, "an attempt to use the proficiency definitions as a set of behavioral objectives, a set of specific criteria against which to measure the success of each unit of the materials" (207). Rickerson's team decided to introduce all new material—grammar, vocabulary, syntax—by tapes and workbooks in order to allow the teacher more freedom to stimulate communication and to monitor student output. Figure 1 shows how Rickerson's team structured the course. Note that the course core modules are arranged not according to grammatical topics but according to situations and functions. Grammar is introduced as it is relevant to these functions, not vice versa. The course aims at a proficiency level of Advanced (ILR 2). Now, this was done already in 1974. Where were the rest of us in 1974?

Another exciting example of the creative use of the proficiency guidelines is Isabelle Kaplan's French conversation program at Northwestern. Kaplan stresses the primacy of the order in which language skills are taught, noting that topics of equal linguistic difficulty can be discussed at any given time, for example, civilization, business French, art history. We need not progress from short stories to culture to plays to novels, but we must always progress from describing, inquiring, and narrating to persuading, hypothesizing, and negotiating. Programs that demand abstract thought but neglect its foundations in

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concrete language are doomed to failure—but, sadly, most language curricula perpetuate the chasm between skill levels at second year, second term, and third year, first term. Traditionally we have offered no curricular bridge over the chasm. And so when the going suddenly gets tough, the students get going, although they vote with their feet and go to other departments.

Exciting individual work, such as that of Rickerson and Kaplan, has inspired curricular rejuvenation throughout the country. As Barbara Freed reported four years ago at the ADFL Tenth Anniversary Seminar, the French department at the University of Pennsylvania has instituted a four-skills proficiency requirement that is compensatory. It aims at the Intermediate-High level (ILR 1+) across the board, but performance above that level in one skill can atone for deficiency in another: a poor speaker might be an outstanding reader, and so on. At Penn, French has been joined by Russian, Arabic, German, and Italian in teaching to the test of proficiency.

At this point I would like to offer two quotes the likes of which must be all too familiar. The first involves two instructors teaching in an elementary language course. "How far did you get this term?" "Well, we just finished the passive, and before the final next Friday we'll take care of the subjunctive in *if* clauses and indirect discourse." This, of course, is the ancient and absurd marathon to finish the book, run annually to justify the purchase of the text or to validate the way it was done back when we—the survivors—did it. This yearly race constitutes nothing less than a professional death wish. Not only do we need texts that are structured according to what we know about pacing and sequencing in second language acquisition, but we teachers also need to realize as individuals that no proficiency-based text will save us if we are unfamiliar with the guidelines of function, content, and accuracy that underlie it.

The second quote comes from any airline magazine one cares to pick up: "Speak Spanish like a diplomat in three months!" "You bet," says the harried traveler. "I had four years of Spanish in high school and I can't order a cup of coffee!" A language advisory council in one of our states proposed recently a set of guidelines for high school curricula that would have fourth-year students speaking extemporaneously on topics of social and political importance, as well as recognizing regional accents by native speakers of the target language. Even worse, the proposal was suggested by language teachers themselves, not by some foggy-minded legislative unit. We have to stop deceiving the public and deluding ourselves in the bargain. This sort of hypocrisy raises false expectations, causing students to feel betrayed when they cannot perform linguistic miracles in a short time. No wonder language study is viewed as peripheral to the K-12 curriculum. The proficiency guidelines show us how to be realistic at each stage of the language learning process and how to teach efficiently and effectively. They will also help us polish our tarnished public image.

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Language programs are changing so rapidly these days that the professional literature is hard-pressed to keep pace. The proficiency movement has fostered changes in the way we place our students, train our teachers, advise our boards of education, award credit by examination, give assistantships to graduate students—and in the way we view our function as professionals in schools, colleges, and universities. It is fostering new kinds of academic alliances between high schools and colleges and is even engendering trust and cooperation among college-level departments in language, business, sciences, communications, and other fields that until recently had little to say to one another. Most important, it has achieved results as a principle for organizing dozens of teaching methods to the single end of producing language learners who learn, speakers who can speak and understand, readers who can read.

Nonetheless there are skeptics. "What about the liberal arts?" they ask. "What about our cherished notions of humanistic study far beyond the range of mere skills acquisition? What about our senior *Faust* seminars, if all this highfalutin proficiency crowd can do is describe, report, explain, hypothesize, and give opinions on abstract topics in a way that does not disturb the native speaker?" As Isabelle Kaplan points out, the skill of describing in the present tense is an ACTFL-ETS Intermediate skill, whether one is describing one's family or the protagonist in a novel or play. When we explain or hypothesize, it does not really matter what the object of explanation or hypothesis is. We explain causality in the real world or the literary world, we conjecture about motives and infer attitudes in contemporary society just as we do in literature, history, and the arts. By learning in a proficiency-based curriculum, students have to become sensitive to standard language, to the dos and don'ts of standard discourse. If anything, literature includes the arrangement of nonstandard language of many types. If our students' recognition and use of the standard is solid, then their recognition and appreciation of the nonstandard, that is, of literature, will be quick and gratifying. If our *Faust* professors have students who can all "describe, report, explain, hypothesize, and give opinions on abstract topics in a way that does not disturb the native speaker," then they are lucky *Faust* scholars indeed. How many of us kept silent in a literature class, not because we had no ideas, but because we were expected to perform at ILR level 3 with level-2 skills? Teaching for proficiency has in turn taught us something about efficiency, about how to close that enormous ability and credibility gap between our traditional second- and third-year levels. What stronger incentive could our students have for upper-division courses than the surprising ability to perform?

The implications for department morale, faculty development, the public image of the foreign language teacher, and our professional self-respect are clear. It has often been said that the key to a strong upper division is a solid and inspiring lower division. Now we have the

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means to ensure that strength and to improve and expand our pivotal role in the center of the liberal arts curriculum. Some years ago we language teachers ceased to be a guild of tight-lipped and unforgiving paradigm parsers, but that is still our image in the eyes of the public. In creating a set of clearly defined goals to teach to, the authors of the *ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines* have given us the wherewithal to teach generations of Americans to use language as it should be used.

Does this approach to language learning ask literary scholars to abandon their cherished hopes in order to teach elementary language courses? Of course not. Does it ask senior faculty to engage themselves directly in the vital task of redirecting and redefining departmental curricula? I should hope so. Teaching for proficiency must be everyone's business if we want to stay in business at all. It eschews the notion of "business as usual" for a few and promotes the ideal of a sound foundation for the solid academic house in which we all must live. Dorothy James, chair of the Department of German at Hunter College, told us recently, "What drew me out of the library and the nineteenth century into this 'movement' of oral proficiency testing . . . was the interview itself. It is aesthetically pleasing and intellectually challenging" (36). Clearly, the introduction of oral proficiency testing has profoundly affected the German department at Hunter College. The method of testing, Dorothy James tells us, "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 have 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" (34).

It is obvious that responsibility for the implementation of proficiency testing and for curricular reform must be shared throughout any language department. The designated-hitter rule, which calls for one junior-level faculty member to coordinate the elementary language sections and train the TAs, is an insidious luxury of the past. To those on the small-department hill here with me, I suggest that you require every one of your colleagues to attend an ACTFL workshop and become a certified proficiency tester. This training is really the sine qua non of curricular development, for it will enable you to maintain not only your own interest but also the flexibility and ingenuity that are pillars of support in departments hard-pressed for survival. Your dean or provost, if sympathetic to your good arguments for a push toward excellence in foreign language education, can liberate faculty development funds for the training. To those in larger depart-

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ments on adjacent hills, I encourage you first of all to arrange ACTFL training in proficiency testing for department administrators, and then to have these people provide a series of workshops for everyone from beginning graduate students to the most august senior faculty members. After all, we are working toward department goals of faculty and curriculum renewal, which will not only increase enrollments and bolster our beleaguered humanities programs but also convince ourselves and others that we know what we are doing.

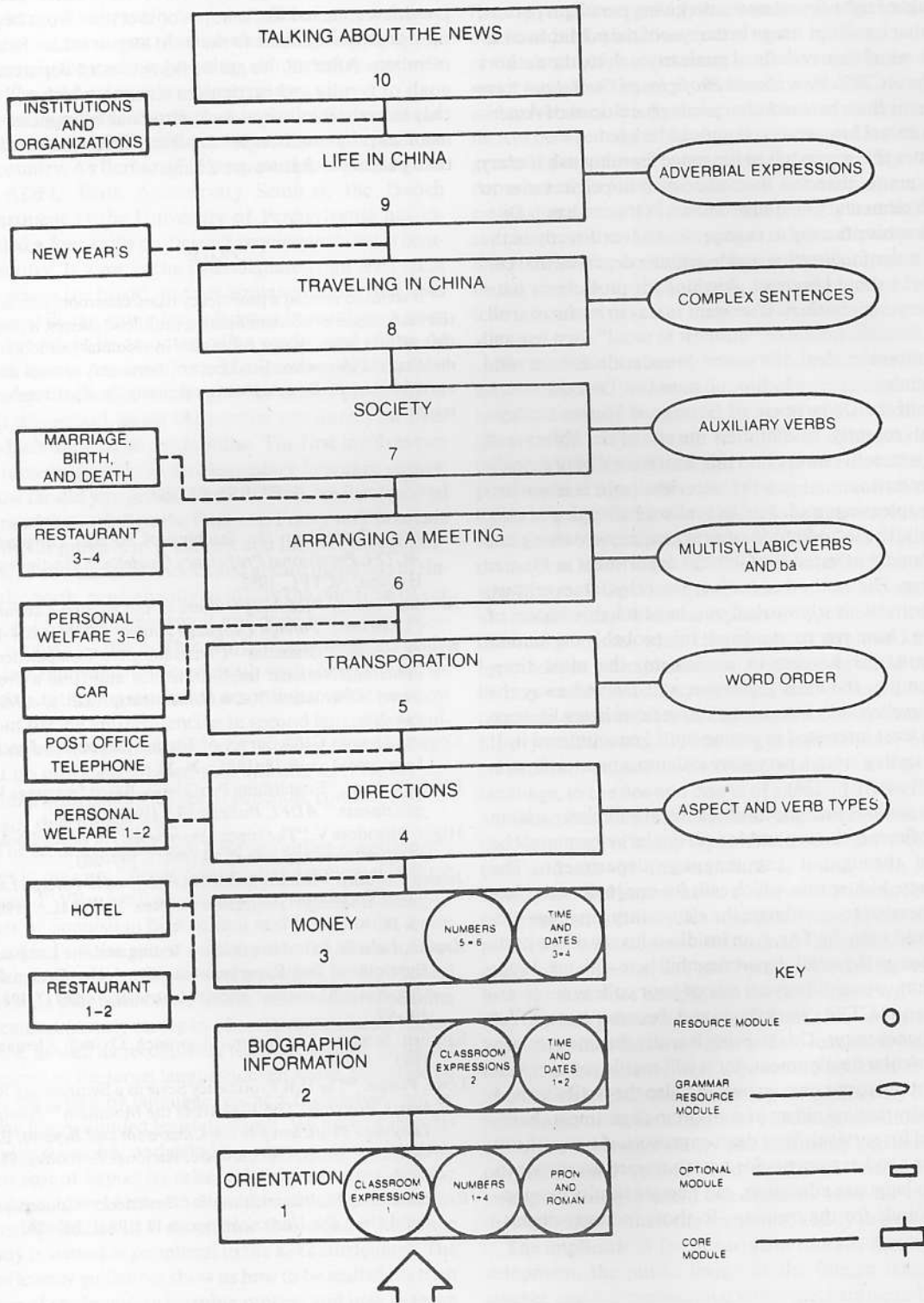
NOTE

¹ It seems to me that a proficiency-based classroom also holds the best chance of accommodating multilevel classes, a plague that afflicts many of our colleagues in secondary schools. Individualized instruction practices are thoroughly enough developed by now to be complemented nicely by situation-based teaching.

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