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PROFICIENCY-BASED FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER CERTIFICATION: THE TEXAS PROJECT

PROFICIENCY-BASED foreign language education has received a lot of attention during the past few years. For example, at the November 1983 annual meeting of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), held jointly with the American Association of Teachers of German (AATG) in San Francisco, the program listed no fewer than twelve sessions dealing with proficiency testing and several preconference workshops on the same topic. ACTFL, ably assisted by Educational Testing Service (ETS), has been and still is performing a Herculean task with two major projects: the foreign language proficiency-guideline project and the tester-training workshops in French, German, and Spanish. As a direct result of these two projects and of the current national climate for greater accountability in education, the three-year Texas Project was born. In the following pages I shall discuss the nature and origins of the Texas Project, identify and comment on its goals, and report on its current status.

The Texas Project was given its name by ACTFL when it applied to the U.S. Department of Education for funds. Specifically, the three-year project's purpose is to train a cadre of Texas-based college-level teachers of French, German, and Spanish so they will be qualified to serve as oral-proficiency interviewers and raters. Since, probably beginning in May 1986, all applicants for a State of Texas Teaching Certificate in foreign languages will be required by law to meet specific teaching-field proficiency requirements, ACTFL-trained interviewers and raters are needed almost immediately.

Training enough interviewers-raters for Texas is no mean task, considering the geographic dimensions of the state: 267,339 square miles. That large an area could accommodate comfortably the Federal Republic of Germany, the German Democratic Republic, Austria, and Switzerland, with enough space left over to include the states of Nebraska, Delaware, and Rhode Island. Any logistical difficulties involved in administering the test would certainly surface in a state of this size. That is one reason ACTFL chose Texas to conduct its project.

The three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education was awarded to ACTFL in 1983, and the project began on 1 September 1983.

Origins of the Texas Project

The Texas Project came about because of two concerns in the state, one dealing with students and the other with their teachers. Let us think first about the students.

Concern with Students

In 1981, after years of turmoil in United States edu-

cation during which curricula in secondary schools had been "enhanced" with about everything imaginable, from bird-watching and bird nesting to crocheting and drug education, the Texas legislature, prompted by various citizens' groups, told the State Board of Education that "enough is enough." People both in and out of education had called on the legislature to prune an overgrown curriculum that contained more desserts than basic intellectual fare. They wanted to start anew, wanted to wipe the slate clean of all those nonessential courses. They asked the lawmakers to tell them what, minimally, a basic, standard, statewide curriculum should look like.

In the past the Texas legislature had prescribed, by bits and pieces, specific elements that had to be added to existing courses: for example, the humane treatment of the environment, both animate and inanimate; the humane education of students in science; or the nature of education. What the legislature had previously failed to do, however, was to define clearly a core curriculum at the secondary level.

This task the legislators accepted in 1981. They identified twelve curricular areas that constituted the core and prescribed that they be offered to students in every school district in the state. For the first time in Texas's educational history, foreign languages were included among these twelve curricular areas, although with the added proviso "to the extent possible."

The legislature then asked the State Board of Education to define the essential elements of a K-12 curriculum in each curricular area. The State Board in turn asked the Curriculum Development Section of the Texas Education Agency (TEA)¹ to fill out the core curriculum with specific course requirements. Assisted by many foreign language experts in the state, this group drafted a proficiency-based foreign language curriculum that was subsequently accepted by the State Board of Education. The recommendation became law in September 1984, and thus the foreign language curriculum proposed by TEA must now be offered in every school district within Texas.

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In 1983, two years after the Texas legislature had tackled the secondary school curriculum, it passed what is known as "the transcript law." This law specifies that high school students have a choice of earning one of two "differentiated" transcripts at graduation, one called "regular" and the other "advanced." To be eligible for an advanced transcript, the student must complete the advanced high school program. Since the legislature did not define the advanced program, that task also fell to the TEA.

The agency listened to advice from various citizens' and educational groups, including the Texas Senate Committee on Education, headed by Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot, which studied a host of educational issues and made recommendations for action to the legislature and the governor. Finally, the TEA recommended that an advanced transcript require a total of twenty-two units for graduation (or forty-four semester units) and that students must either take three levels of a proficiency-based foreign language program or demonstrate equivalent foreign language proficiency. Since then, the State Board of Education has accepted the recommendation in principle, settling for a two-level foreign language requirement for an advanced transcript, effective for all ninth graders in the fall of 1984 (Reyes).

The standards for a minimal level 2 exit proficiency, along with the proficiency standards for level 1, have been the subject of several meetings and proficiency-oriented conferences conducted under the auspices of the TEA. Foreign language educators from all areas of the state have offered suggestions and helped write proficiency statements for reading, writing, speaking, and listening; for culture; and for an additional area, labeled "language," that consists of linguistic and nonlinguistic components related to language learning, such as contrastively focused structural and syntactic comparisons between the native and the target language and nonverbal communication (facial and body movements) accompanying and supporting linguistic behavior in the target language. The resulting document, of which oral foreign language proficiency is very much a part, is as of this writing in final draft form. The standards developed use as their basis the ACTFL-ETS provisional foreign language proficiency descriptions; however, they have not yet been cast in concrete.

During the coming months, the State Board of Education will decide exactly what standards are to be used to describe the various foreign language exit proficiencies for high school students and how they are to be measured.

Concern with Teachers

So much for the requirements for high school students that underlie the Texas Project. The Texas legislature has also been deeply concerned about teachers, both present and future.

Back in 1979, when the proficiency issue first began gaining momentum throughout the United States, members of the legislature reasoned that students generally do not advance beyond the level of their teachers, especially in skill-development courses, the category into which foreign language courses, particularly at the lower level, fall. As a result, the 1981 legislature created a Commission on Standards for the Teaching Profession, composed of sixteen members, among them representatives from schools and colleges. It instructed the commission to take a hard look at all aspects of the teacher-education programs in Texas and to describe the core courses that must be offered at each institution for each of the already established twelve teaching areas. Forty-seven colleges in the state offer teacher education, although only fifteen of them account for about ninety percent of the graduating foreign language teachers. Of that group only a portion (about 220) apply for certification each year.

The Texas legislature also mandated that, after May 1984, all students planning to enter a teacher-education program in Texas must take a Preprofessional Skills Test (P-PST), generally at the end of their sophomore year, to evaluate their proficiency in reading, writing, and computation. Pilot tests were conducted in 1983; the first statewide mandatory tests were administered in March 1984. The results of the pilot test indicate that about 35% of the Hispanic, 16% of the black, and 70% of the white and other (Asian-American, Native American, etc.) applicants for admission to a teacher-education program would pass the P-PST. The 1984 test results were somewhat better than expected: 40% of the Hispanic, 26% of the black, and 79% of the white and other applicants passed. Noticeable improvement was evident in two of the three areas tested.²

Subject	Percent Who Passed	
	1983	1984
Reading	62.0	73.3
Mathematics	64.0	70.5
Writing	65.0	67.1

In addition to mandating the P-PST for students beginning teacher education, the Texas legislature required that a field-specific proficiency test be administered to every student who graduates from a Texas teacher-education program. The language of this legislation is precise: candidates must be tested in their chosen teaching field and must demonstrate proficiency therein. They must also be graduates of a teacher-education program that teaches them how to teach the applicable elements of the K-12 curriculum within the earlier mentioned twelve curricular areas.

For the foreign language curricula, the Commission on Standards for the Teaching Profession, through the TEA, had to wrestle with two questions: how to administer the tests and what to test for, to ensure that all areas of the candidates' foreign language proficiency would in fact be assessed. A third question—and not an unimportant one—also needed an answer: what minimal level of field-specific proficiencies must an applicant demonstrate to qualify for a foreign language teaching certificate in Texas, whether the applicant is moving to Texas from another state, reentering the job market, or just graduating from a Texas teacher-education program.

An advisory committee of language educators, appointed by the Commission on Standards for the Teaching Profession, has recently recommended to the commission that the minimal proficiency standards for a secondary teaching certificate in foreign languages be set at the "Advanced-Plus" level, as specified by the ACTFL-ETS Proficiency Guidelines, or the 2+ level on the FSI-ILR (Foreign Service Institute-Inter-Agency Language Roundtable) scale. For the elementary grades, the advisory committee recommended that the minimal proficiency standard for a teaching certificate in foreign languages be set at the "Advanced" level of the ACTFL-ETS scale or at level 2 of the FSI-ILR scale.

Some time during the next few months, the Commission on Standards for the Teaching Profession will give to the State Board of Education its final recommendations for the proficiencies to be demonstrated in each teaching field and the minimal standards required for teacher certification. These standards will become effective perhaps as early as May 1986, probably in May 1987.

Goals of the Texas Project

The Texas Project has four essential goals. The first is informational: to familiarize foreign language teachers and students with the upcoming state-mandated changes that will affect them—changes in foreign language teacher certification, graduation requirements from teacher-education programs, and high school graduation requirements for students who want to earn an advanced transcript and plan to enroll in college.³

The second goal is to train an adequate number of oral-proficiency interviewers and raters in French, German, and Spanish, the three languages on which the ACTFL grant focuses. The training must be done within three years so that qualified people will be in place throughout the state, according to a sensible geographic distribution based on area needs, before the state-mandated proficiency requirements for teacher education become law, possibly as early as 1986.

The third goal is to pilot-test, on a volunteer basis, students entering and graduating from teacher-education

programs in French, German, and Spanish and to establish their oral-proficiency levels at both points. Pilot tests began in May 1984 and will be repeated at least once, probably twice, each year.

The fourth goal is to provide members of the state legislature, the State Board of Education, and the Commission on Standards for the Teaching Profession with information and recommendations on which they can base their decisions about proficiency requirements, due soon for students graduating from foreign language teacher-education programs in the state. In accomplishing this goal, the Texas Project wants to demonstrate to these three groups the viability and feasibility of including in the proficiency package a valid, reliable oral-proficiency test, since project members hope that oral-skill assessment will become a cornerstone among the proficiencies required of an applicant for a foreign language teaching certificate in Texas.

Implementation

I would now like to comment on each of these four goals and to identify the procedures employed to reach them, thereby providing a status report on the three-year project.

The first, informational goal of the project has a barely disguised hidden agenda: to make known throughout Texas among the foreign language teaching profession, the foreign language teacher-education profession, and members of the various state boards, commissions, and committees on education that the foreign language teachers in the state welcome demonstrated, functional proficiency and, in particular, support placing special emphasis on an oral-proficiency requirement for certification.

In pursuit of this goal, a growing number of those involved in the Texas Project are willing to go anywhere in the state to talk to any group of students, teachers, college administrators, state legislators, and state officials, to make sure all these groups clearly understand that we are talking about functional foreign language proficiency, not a number of courses finished with a particular GPA, and that all future foreign language teachers in Texas must demonstrate that they can function in the foreign language they teach.

To illustrate the need for proficiency-based foreign language education more vividly, allow me a minor digression. On behalf of the Southwest Conference, the Texas Education Agency conducted in the fall of 1983 a nationwide survey on testing prospective teachers for initial state certification. Only ten of the fifty states presently require prospective teachers to take an examination in their specific teaching fields before they become certified. These states are Alabama, Arkansas, California, Georgia, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Four

2-11-80
other states, Connecticut, Kentucky, Texas, and West Virginia, currently have state mandates to establish, in the near future, tests in the specific teaching fields for which certification is being requested.

This type of survey is nothing new, but it provides us with the most recent information on the subject. In this context, it is interesting to note that only two of the fifty states surveyed, Georgia and Massachusetts, require prospective foreign language teachers to demonstrate oral proficiency in the language for which they seek certification. Thus the push in Texas to emphasize minimal functional standards of oral proficiency and to establish, with the help of ACFTL and ETS, a workable system of administering a valid, reliable test seems to meet a nationwide need.

Foreign language educators in Texas are not naive enough to believe that any legislation can be replicated from one state to another. They know, however, that they can, both legislatively and professionally, serve as a model for other states and professional groups to follow in designing their own legislation and establishing their own teacher-certification requirements, based on their own needs and special circumstances.

That brings me back to Texas and the second goal of the Texas Project: to train and place throughout the state an adequate number of oral-proficiency interviewers and raters in French, German, and Spanish within the next few years.

In January 1984, twenty-four college teachers of French, German, and Spanish met in Austin, Texas, to participate in the first oral-proficiency tester-training workshop conducted under the U.S. Department of Education's Texas Project grant. The Academic Coordinating Committee had met in December 1983 in Austin to select, from a large pool of applicants, the workshop participants: six college teachers of French, five of German, and thirteen of Spanish. During the five-day workshop, they learned how to conduct and rate an oral-proficiency interview according to the criteria developed by ACTFL, ETS, and the ILR. On completion of that workshop, the participants went home to practice their newly acquired skills by conducting ten taped fifteen- to twenty-minute interviews, using high school and college students as subjects. They were to rate these taped interviews and mail them with their rating to an experienced interviewer-rater for analysis and constructive criticism. Later, after receiving and studying the trainer's comments on the first batch of interviews, each workshop participant produced fifteen additional taped interviews. These, again, were evaluated and constructively criticized by the expert.

At the end of April 1984, the workshop participants returned to Austin for a two-day follow-up workshop. At that session they evaluated their work, discussed any remaining difficulties with the interviewing techniques or the rating process, and considered the potential curricular implications of the project. This series of train-

0666-4
ing workshops will be repeated at least once more before 1986, doubling the number of trained oral-proficiency interviewers and raters available within the state for each of the three languages.

At the April follow-up workshop the participants also became familiar with the logistics for implementing the third goal of the Texas Project: the voluntary pilot testing of graduating teacher-education majors. That program took place in May and tested four hundred college students (juniors to graduates).

Those familiar with the size of our state may wonder how the Academic Coordinating Committee dealt with the logistics of this testing enterprise and how it arranged to have qualified interviewers-raters available where they were needed. That was indeed one of the committee's major concerns. However, with the help of colleagues from TEA, the committee has devised what seems to be a workable solution. Because of the size of Texas, twenty Regional Education Service Centers already exist, sprinkled throughout the state to serve each area's needs. They were established years ago and are fully operational. The Texas Project made good use of them. To start with, the Academic Coordinating Committee divided the state into six large areas, each encompassing several Regional Education Service Centers (Fig. 1). One testing site was established at a service center in each of the six geographic areas. The six testing sites are in Edinburg (Area 1), Austin (Area 2), Houston (Area 3), Dallas (Area 4), Lubbock (Area 5), and El Paso (Area 6).

In drawing the boundaries for the six major testing areas and deciding on the location for each testing site, the committee was guided by two sets of criteria: the location of the fifteen universities with large teacher-education programs and the proximity of these institutions to the proposed testing sites. In selecting the twenty-four participants for the initial oral-proficiency tester-training workshop, the committee was guided first by the number of graduating French, German, and Spanish teachers who, during the past few years, have applied for their initial teaching certificates in each geographic area; second, by the needs for teachers of specific languages in the area; and third, by the presence in that area of trained oral-proficiency interviewers-raters in each language. For example, Area 1, located in the most southern part of the state, has hardly any need for interviewers-raters in French or German. Spanish is the primary language taught and spoken there, so three of the thirteen available slots for Spanish went to applicants from Area 1. The same criteria were applied to the needs of, and applications from, the other areas and languages.

By the time field-specific proficiency testing becomes law in Texas, probably in 1986, the committee hopes to have in place an adequate number of trained oral-proficiency interviewers-raters for each language in each of the six geographic areas. They will be qualified, first of all, to conduct interviews at least twice a year (spring

and fall) at the testing sites for all who seek a Texas teaching certificate in French, German, or Spanish. Second, the committee hopes that the trained interviewers-raters can continue the oral-proficiency testing of students who are beginning their teacher-education program in these three languages, not only to determine the students' entry-level oral proficiency but also to assist them and their advisers in preparing to meet the level of functional foreign language proficiency mandated by the state for a teaching certificate.

The Texas Project has completed its first year. Those involved have two more years to convince their colleagues teaching foreign languages in Texas's colleges and high schools that it makes sense to require demonstrated functional foreign language proficiency, including oral proficiency, for teacher certification purposes, to convince the Texas legislators and the State Board of Education that it is feasible to create and maintain an adequate, properly trained group of oral-proficiency interviewers and raters, located where they are needed; and to convince those colleagues responsible for teacher-education programs in the state that their curricula must incorporate adequate opportunities for their students to develop in the target language those levels of proficiency in culture and in all four skill areas that are required for certification.

The response to the Texas Project has been favorable from all quarters. Interest in the topic of proficiency testing and proficiency standards for future teachers runs high in the state. There is little doubt that, with the Texas Project, educators will succeed in making foreign language teacher certification in Texas proficiency-based, with special emphasis on demonstrated functional oral proficiency.

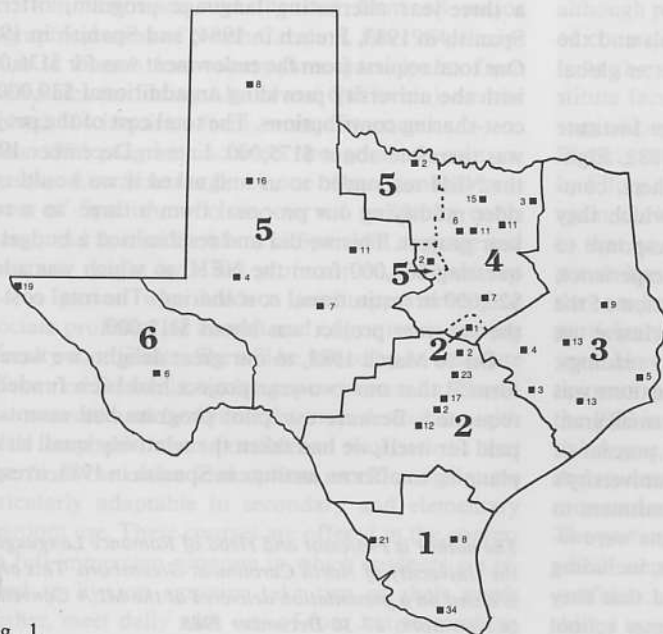


Fig. 1

NOTES

¹The Texas Education Agency is made up of the Commissioner of Education, the State Board of Education, and the State Department of Education.

²A breakdown of the 1984 figures by subject area and ethnic group yields the following data:

Reading: N tested = 2,722; passed, 73.3%

Group	N tested	Passed
Hispanic	431	42%
Black	124	37%
White	2,125	82%
Other	42	71%

Mathematics: N tested = 2,707; passed, 70.5%

Group	N tested	Passed
Hispanic	429	38%
Black	121	21%
White	2,116	80%
Other	41	78%

Writing: N tested = 2,710; passed, 67.1%

Group	N tested	Passed
Hispanic	426	40%
Black	121	21%
White	2,116	75%
Other	41	62%

³All major colleges and universities in Texas are reinstating a foreign language entrance and/or exit requirement, one that may be proficiency-based rather than credit-hour-based.

WORK CITED

Reyes, Raul. "Back-to-Basics' Law to Be Implemented in Fall Semester." *Houston Chronicle* 11 Mar. 1984, sec. 1: 25.