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A NOTE ON PROFICIENCY AND COMMUNICATION IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

IN AN interesting article entitled "Toward Realistic Objectives in Foreign Language Teaching," Dorothy James makes a strong case for the importance of teaching oral proficiency. A key paragraph reports on experiments at Middlebury College that "show quite fascinatingly that students who go abroad for a year come back chattering nineteen to the dozen in the foreign language." But they normally rate less than well on oral proficiency:

They have acquired large vocabularies, but their mastery of grammar is frequently inadequate. . . . 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. . . . Oral proficiency . . . 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.

The notions summarized in this paragraph seem so obvious that I feel almost obliged to beg forgiveness for questioning them. Let me state my qualifications. I have spoken French since childhood and have taught it on and off during most of my professional life. On the other hand, I taught myself Italian, massacre it happily but effectively, and have for a considerable time lived four months a year in Italy, speaking with Italians about anything and everything, including intellectual matters. It is my experience with Italian that makes me doubt James's thesis, which is surely what most of the profession would support.

Our goal in teaching the spoken language should be precisely what students with foreign experience often acquire, namely, the ability to communicate more or less rapidly with native speakers concerning subjects of mutual interest. Communicating is all that matters to our students; it happens to be all I care about as I deal with Italians, from servants to professors. To communicate, I need only to have something interesting to say and to express it quickly so as to make myself understood by a native speaker. That speaker knows the correct gender of the words I may mistake; he or she identifies the subjunctive I turned into an indicative and mentally corrects without difficulty the consonant I voiced when it should have been unvoiced or the vowel I pronounced closed when it should have been open. I mastered communication in Italian almost as fast as I learned vocabulary and learned or mislearned grammatical constructions.

Benjamin F. Bart

Our students want to master effective oral communication in their study of a foreign language, and they are right. Effectiveness means intelligibility and sufficient rapidity. My many mistakes in Italian do not hinder intelligibility. Real sentences in real situations allow the native speaker to make corrections. But adequate rapidity is also indispensable. At a party, if my utterances were painfully slow, my interlocutor would soon courteously leave me, no matter how interesting my thoughts might be when I got them out. Indeed, the more I were to worry about correctness, the less able I would be to win and retain my listener's attention.

Nor is that all. In her article James rejects the notion that "an insistence on oral proficiency means a lowering of standards." Language teachers should define more closely what this statement means. As an overall objective in language teaching, any gain is a gain, and better oral proficiency marks an improvement; as such it is valuable. But in a fixed period—for instance, the two college years that our students normally allow us—total proficiency is not attainable. Hence any increase in one dimension means a loss in another. If we teach our students greater oral proficiency, we allot more time to this aspect and necessarily less to learning vocabulary and minimal grammar. My proposition is that we will, on the one hand, lower rapidity by inviting, even forcing, students to seek relatively high accuracy, for they will be worried lest they make still another mistake. On the other hand, insofar as students have fewer words at their command, their ability to communicate is lowered. The use of gross approximations of meaning would lead my hypothetical native interlocutor at a party to leave in search of someone more interesting quite as rapidly as would inadequate speed of utterance.

I return now to James's students who come back from a foreign country "chattering nineteen to the dozen in the foreign language." Such students are in precisely my situation in regard to Italian. They apparently can and do communicate adequately in the foreign tongue; but our professional measurements, which should include

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a boredom index, cannot display this ability. I submit that the test, not the student's oral effectiveness, is deficient.

A final note: The time used in efforts to attain high levels of oral proficiency (not *effectiveness*, which might be high) cannot be bought without taking time from other areas. The time I have saved by accepting my lower level of oral proficiency in Italian I have put into reading Italian literature, learning something of the country's long past, and coming to grips with its present state. This knowledge, I submit, is part of why I have something to say to Italians and why I can keep their interest in a conversation at a party.

I am on the side of James's students. They have faced the battle of effective communication and have won. This is not the place to discuss how to teach efficient

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oral communication, but I do ask my fellow language teachers to ponder the meaning of oral proficiency for a moment.¹

NOTE

¹ The issues I discuss might appear in a slightly different light had I been taught a high oral proficiency in Italian and had then taught myself French. My thesis would remain the same, but it would require qualifications that any teacher of French who has lived in France could readily supply, especially if he or she has also lived in Italy.

WORK CITED

James, Dorothy. "Toward Realistic Objectives in Foreign Language Teaching." *ADFL Bulletin* 16.2 (1985): 9-12.

Fulbright Program

The Fulbright Program, funded and administered by the United States Information Agency, will celebrate its fortieth anniversary in 1986 with numerous special events at home and abroad. Exchanges of forty American and forty foreign scholars and artists, some of them Nobel Prize winners, will highlight the celebration, which will include the Fulbright Fortieth Anniversary Lectures. Since its inception, the Fulbright Program has awarded grants to more than 150,000 persons, allowing them to study, teach, lecture, and conduct research in foreign countries. By the 1970s the number of countries participating in the program had increased from 27 to 120, with a concurrent drop of 57% in funding for the exchanges. During the last four years, however, this trend has been reversed: the 1985 budget of \$82 million represents twice the amount of funding available in 1982. Financial support comes from United States Congressional appropriations and from the governments of 27 other nations.

Of the Fulbright grant recipients during the 1985-86 academic year, 27 represent foreign languages and literatures. These grantees have spanned the globe, conducting research in countries from Iceland to Australia and

from Denmark to Malawi. Brazil was by far the most popular site in 1985-86, hosting six Fulbright lecturers and researchers.

Rockefeller Fellowships for High School Teachers

Now in its second year, the Rockefeller Foundation Fellowships for Foreign Language Teachers in the High Schools, administered by Academic Alliances, awards grants of \$3,500 to \$4,500 each to one hundred teachers for six to eight weeks of summer study in the United States or abroad. The program helps teachers improve language facility, broaden their professional interests, and renew contact with contemporary culture. To be eligible, teachers must be under contract to teach during the academic year following the fellowship summer and must have at least five years of service remaining before retirement. For applications, write to Rockefeller Foundation Fellowships for Foreign Language Teachers in the High Schools, Academic Alliances, 210 Logan Hall, Univ. of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia 19104-6384 or call (215) 898-2745. The deadline for 1987 fellowships is 15 November 1986.