

Attaining High Levels of Proficiency: Challenges for Foreign Language Education in the United States

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Introduction

Recent events have highlighted America's security, military, diplomatic, and business need for individuals who can speak and understand languages other than English. In fact, the September 26, 2001, report of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence states that language is the single greatest need in the intelligence community. Former Senator Paul Simon (2001) has pointed out, "Today, some 80 federal agencies need proficiency in nearly 100 foreign languages. While the demand is great, the supply remains almost nonexistent. Only 8% of American college students study another language."

Not surprisingly, if relatively few individuals learn languages other than English, even fewer learn them to high levels of proficiency. Yet, high levels of proficiency in all languages are crucial for meeting national needs. In order to achieve these language proficiency goals, significantly greater resources are required, particularly in the higher education community. There is great promise in the progress made to fill the need for resources in a number of languages, but the challenge is still great, given the number of languages and the investment needed to attain high levels of proficiency. In this paper, we investigate the adequacy and availability of new pedagogical methods and tools, information technologies, and testing proce-

dures for language training for achieving high levels of proficiency. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the successes and challenges of current approaches while suggesting new ways to help develop high-level speakers of foreign languages in the United States.

Developing High Proficiency Levels

In the language teaching field, the term *high-level learner* traditionally refers to a level of 3 or higher on the 5-point Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale or *Superior* or above according to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines. A learner at the *Superior* level can "communicate in the language with accuracy and fluency in order to participate fully and effectively in conversations on a variety of topics in formal and informal settings" (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1999), while a learner at the higher *Distinguished* level "begins to approach the level of an educated native speaker" (Leaver & Shekhtman, 2002). In addition to demonstrating a high level of language proficiency, speakers at these levels possess the academic and discourse skills, such as the ability to hypothesize and persuade, that would be expected of any educated person in the target culture.

The U.S. postsecondary education system offers opportunities for students to develop language proficiency through language, literature, and cultural studies. However, the typical undergradu-

ate program offers only 3 contact hours per week, which, after 2 years, yields at most 180 hours of instruction. Even the *Advanced* level of proficiency (one level below *Superior*) can take up to 720 hours to achieve; to acquire proficiency at the *Superior* level in a language such as Russian, the Foreign Service Institute estimates that a minimum of 1320 hours is required (Omaggio-Hadley, 2001).

Pathways to Proficiency

Despite the need for individuals with high levels of proficiency in a range of languages, there is little in the literature on how best to develop such speakers. Many instructors lack the training and background necessary to conduct proficiency-oriented courses to take learners from *Intermediate*-level competence to the *Advanced* level, let alone from *Advanced* to *Superior* or higher. However, there are several possible approaches to developing high-level language learners among the American population:

- building on the language background of heritage speakers
- starting language learning early to build a strong basis for second, third, and even fourth language learning
- providing intensive immersion experiences for students at the postsecondary level, including overseas study in a target-language culture

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These pathways, preferably in combination, increase the likelihood that learners will develop high levels of proficiency.

Pedagogical Approaches

If the United States is to develop highly proficient speakers of foreign languages, we must expand the number of Americans studying foreign languages, especially the less commonly taught languages (LCTL), and offer the types of classroom and out-of-classroom experiences that help individual learners build high levels of expertise. These are some approaches that may further this goal:

- Offering intensive summer institutes, such as those offered by Middlebury College (www.middlebury.edu/lis/introduction.html) and the University of Wisconsin (<http://wiscinfo.doit.wisc.edu/seassi/>)
- Expanding curricular offerings, especially in professional subject matter areas (e.g., offering courses such as engineering and business in the target language) (see, e.g., Angelelli & Degueudre, 2002)
- Providing overseas study to immerse learners in the language and culture, such as programs in China that include content courses in Chinese and internships with Chinese organizations (see Kubler, 2002)
- Developing materials for upper-level students, such as the computer-mediated tutorials to teach *Advanced* skills in Russian that were developed at the University of Wisconsin-Madison
- Offering comprehensive programs in selected languages, such as those supported by the National Flagship Programs (www.nflc.org/news/press_releases/FundingOfLanguageInitiativeAtFlagshipUniversities.htm)

Technology

A number of different technologies, including distance-learning

courses, encourage and support the development and maintenance of high levels of proficiency. The World Wide Web brings authentic language and cultural experiences to the student. The Internet provides opportunities for students to interact with native speakers, to access culturally appropriate, high-level reading and listening texts, and to conduct research in their areas of expertise. Distance learning can combine texts, videos, CD-ROMs, and synchronous and asynchronous use of the Internet in effective ways, as exemplified by advanced online courses for Chinese, Japanese, and Korean developed at the University of Hawaii.

Resources

The availability of resources for the LCTLs has increased steadily, but they remain especially hard to find for advanced language levels. A positive difference has come with the establishment of 14 federally funded language resource centers to strengthen the capacity of the language education community for both teachers and learners. For example, the Language Acquisition Resource Center at the University of San Diego has established the Center for the Advancement of Distinguished Language Proficiency, to build national capacity in developing near-native language proficiency, through direct instruction, materials development, publications, research, and faculty development. Another important resource is the database of LCTL course offerings (postsecondary and K-12) maintained by the Center for Advanced Research in Language Acquisition at the University of Minnesota, making it possible to identify schools and colleges where LCTLs are being taught. Information about textbooks and other materials in LCTLs is collected by the Language Materials Project at the University of California, Los Angeles. The International Research and Studies Program of the U.S. Department of Education has also been a major supporter of the development of

textbooks, course materials, dictionaries, and grammars for the LCTLs. Over 1,200 projects have been funded, most providing the core materials that many departments and centers now use for advanced language skills instruction.

Assessments

To work toward the goal of developing high levels of proficiency in learners, we must also find ways to determine when learners have reached these levels. Some assessments measure high levels of proficiency, but they are not widely available. The U.S. government's oral proficiency interview (OPI) reaches beyond ACTFL *Superior* to ILR levels 4 and 5, but training for this test is limited in access. Similarly, a number of U.S. government agencies test listening and reading beyond the ACTFL *Superior* level. However, such tests are not released for reasons of national security and cannot be administered to university students. In addition, there are fewer trained OPI testers in the less commonly taught languages than in the commonly taught languages, and still fewer tester trainers to train new testers in LCTLs. Some initiatives are beginning to fill the gaps in assessment. For example, the Center for Applied Linguistics is developing a Web-delivered test of listening and reading proficiency in Arabic and Russian that will cover the range of *Novice* through *Superior* levels of proficiency. But many gaps remain.

A Case Study: What Works in Russian

Russian is one LCTL in which some students have attained high levels of proficiency. The following sequence of courses and educational opportunities has proved successful in Russian:

- A solid foundation in Russian grammar, syntax, and pronunciation taught within a proficiency-oriented course progression at the beginning and intermediate levels

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- Summer immersion experiences within the United States
- Established study abroad programs in Russian-speaking countries
- Fourth-year courses (offered on campus) in Russian, not necessarily limited to literary discussions
- Extended residency in Russia after graduation

Although the above-mentioned Russian course sequence is available at some institutions, the full sequence is not offered at most institutions. In addition, the critical fourth-year, post-study abroad course is often not available; this leaves students without a viable language course after the study abroad experience. Even with all these advantages, Russian language programs in American institutions routinely graduate students with only *Intermediate-level* oral proficiency.

Challenges

Many challenges remain:

- Effective pedagogical approaches, such as intensive language programs in the United States and study abroad, need to be made available, affordable, and feasible for many students. Currently, early language programs are not widely available; study abroad is financially difficult for many students.
- Insufficient numbers of instructors have adequate training in language teaching or high levels of proficiency themselves.
- Although technology can improve the efficiency of language learning and can increase the number of listening and reading texts to which students are exposed, there is little incentive for university faculty to develop instructional software to enhance high-level learning. Technology costs are also problematic.

- Although diverse resources have been developed, adequate resources for the full course sequence are still unavailable in many languages.
- Few assessments are available to test high levels of language proficiency in many languages.
- Currently, there are few incentives for students to study LCTLs, nor are there adequate incentives to institutions to offer LCTLs.

Recommendations

Language educators have made progress toward increasing student proficiency in many languages through technology, materials, and resource centers. Although more progress is needed for all languages to increase the number of students who reach high levels of proficiency, it is important at this time to focus on LCTLs in order to address current national interests.

In order to increase the pool of students who complete language programs with high levels of proficiency, we must have a large pool of learners from which we can draw. Thus, we need to

- clarify and disseminate definitions of high levels of proficiency;
- support the development and use of more tests that measure high levels of language proficiency;
- provide incentives to K-12 school districts to develop well-articulated, sustained learning sequences beginning at the lower grades;
- support heritage language learning;
- provide incentives for students to attain high levels of proficiency;
- provide support to institutions that offer LCTLs;
- support teacher quality in foreign language teaching (K-12 and university faculty) across all languages;

- support effective and essential approaches to developing high levels of language proficiency; and
- research “what works” in language teaching and learning.

Conclusion

The need for proficient foreign language speakers is clear in the context of national interests and security. The cost of ignoring this need has already been felt, and the situation will become even more urgent if sufficient planning and resources are not allocated to develop a language-proficient society that includes individuals with high levels of proficiency in critical languages.

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