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The Rationale for Defining and Measuring Foreign Language Proficiency in Programs for Business

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ABSTRACT *This paper summarizes a presentation for the 1983 Conference on Foreign Languages for Business and the Professions at Eastern Michigan University. The authors discuss the origin of language proficiency assessment in government, its adaptation for use in academic contexts, and one example of the potential of proficiency-based learning and its applications in an international corporate context.*

A Challenge: Foreign Language Job Requirements

"Applicant should be fluent in one or more of the following languages..." "...must be fully bilingual." "Knowledge of Portuguese preferred." "Excellent skills in both German/English are necessary." "Working knowledge of Arabic/Hebrew required." What does the employer really mean when specifying such requirements? How do applicants interpret them? What provisions is the foreign language profession making to clarify this job market shorthand?

This article discusses the origins and uses of proficiency-based systems in government and education, an initial application of proficiency-

based oral skills assessment in one corporate setting, and the wide range of potential applications of proficiency-based systems for business, industry, and the professions in general.

With regard to foreign language proficiency, the modern corporation (or individual members of the business-industrial community and the professions) resembles both the government and the education communities. It resembles government in the immediacy and functional nature of the need, and it resembles education in that the initial focus must often be on instruction rather than application. It is therefore not surprising that uses of the proficiency system important to *each* of the other groups will also be significant in the business and professional context.

Proficiency Rating in Government and Education

A standardized, proficiency-based approach to foreign language skills assessment has evolved in the government and is being adapted for academic use by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and the Educational Testing Service (ETS). Proficiency testing differs markedly from achievement testing, the classroom tradition. The latter tends to be based on a limited body of recently taught material, while proficiency testing encompasses functional use of the totality of the language compared to that of an educated native speaker.

Although some form of foreign language proficiency measurement has been utilized in govern-

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ment for over twenty-five years, the evolution of proficiency rating scales has been gradual. In 1955 the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) initiated a project to define the foreign language skills of its personnel. The resulting skills descriptions grew in sophistication during the ensuing decade and were adopted by other government agencies, including the Central Intelligence Agency Language School, the Defense Language Institute, and the Peace Corps. In 1968 agency representatives met to standardize these proficiency-based level definitions. The resultant scale extends from Level 0 (for no practical proficiency) to Level 5 (for performance equivalent to that of an educated native speaker) and includes "plus" levels at ranges 0 through 4 for performance more than half way to the next level, resulting in eleven range distinctions. Now known as the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) Definitions, this scale is the standard for language proficiency ratings in government.

To date, oral proficiency—evaluated by means of an interview—has received the greatest attention. The oral interview is "a face-to-face test of a candidate's speaking ability when talking to two trained testers" (in the academic context, usually one trained tester) "for a period of ten to forty minutes. The resulting speech sample is then rated on (the ILR) scale..."¹

Until recently, few educators outside of government were familiar with the oral interview and rating scale, and little effort was made to explore its use in academic institutions. In 1979 the Educational Testing Service received funding from the Department of Education to investigate the establishment of a "common yardstick" of performance standards in one or more language skills for the non-government academic environment. After considering existing proficiency scales in the United States, Europe, and Japan, it was decided that commitment to a modified form of the 0-5 government scale was advisable. It was further decided that some adaptation of the ILR scale would be necessary if it were to have meaningful academic application, since the government scale does not discriminate finely enough in the ranges of the scale where most academic learners perform. A 1967 study by John B. Carroll had determined that the average proficiency of graduating foreign language majors in U.S. colleges and universities was Level 2 or 2+.² In addition, an on-the-job language needs assessment of foreign language personnel conducted by FSI determined that most professional language needs could be satisfied by Level 3 or lower proficiency.³ Therefore it was believed there would be greater need for academic users to

distinguish between Levels 0 through 3 than between Levels 3+ through 5. As a result, an academic scale was proposed which addressed these differences, yet conformed to the structure of the ILR scale. The relationship between government and academic proficiency scales is presented below.

ILR SCALE	ACTFL/ETS SCALE
5 native or bilingual proficiency	superior
4 +	
4 distinguished proficiency	
3 +	
3 professional proficiency	advanced plus
2 +	advanced
2 limited working proficiency	intermediate—high
1 +	intermediate—mid
1 elementary proficiency	intermediate—low
0 +	novice—high
0 no practical proficiency	novice—mid
	novice—low

Applications of Proficiency Ratings: Government and Business

Proficiency ratings are routinely used for job classification and language-related assignments in government, and in some cases, salary increments are linked to proficiency ratings. By defining a job

as requiring Level 2 (Advanced) oral proficiency (or reading, writing, or listening proficiency) the vagueness and confusion resulting from the use of such terms as "fluent," "bilingual," and "working proficiency" are eliminated. In addition to being useful to the employer, these proficiency scales are also useful to the job applicant, who understands from the outset what is expected and can better assess whether he or she possesses the required proficiency.

Given the immediate, task-oriented language performance requirements typifying both government and business, how might language proficiency ratings serve the private sector? Suppose a job applicant were to present a potential employer with a document certifying Level 2 (Advanced) oral proficiency in a target language. By referring to the rating definitions, the employer could confirm that a Level 2 (Advanced) speaker can satisfy survival, social, and limited work requirements and perform the linguistic functions of narration and description, expressing past, present, and future time with relative accuracy. With this type of information for each of the skill areas, the employer would be better able to judge whether a job applicant is able to sell microcomputers in Mexico, be responsible for telex correspondence to Japan, or properly greet Saudi VIP's at the airport. The rise in telecommunications, the number of multinational corporations, and increased trade between U.S. and foreign concerns indicate that the climate is right for the implementation of proficiency-based credentials in business or industry.

Business Utility: An Example

What are the implications of these proficiency projects for language *instruction and use* in business and industry? Let us look at how the ACTFL proficiency scale is utilized in one business German program at the corporate headquarters of American Hoechst Corporation in Somerville, New Jersey (the U.S. subsidiary of Hoechst Aktiengesellschaft with headquarters in Frankfurt, Federal Republic of Germany). Since 1979 this program has provided for on-site instruction and consulting services based on the company's immediate and long-range needs. The program aims for language and cultural training tailored to individual on-site job requirements and to professionals preparing for transfer abroad. Aside from applications within narrowly-defined professional areas, participants require foreign language skills for basic social/business needs, general economics and business contexts, and current events—that is, for language of wider utility than the job-specific

context.

To date, oral proficiency interviews conducted in the program illustrate the value of the interview process in evaluating areas of linguistic and contextual strength and weakness, in motivating learners to overcome hesitation and linguistic plateaus, and in assessing program effectiveness.

In the oral interview, each question has a specific linguistic and contextual purpose, and ultimately, the interviewer needs to find the candidate's level of "linguistic breakdown," the level at which the candidate can no longer maintain linguistically accurate and culturally appropriate performance. The oral interview has four basic phases: 1) the warm-up, during which the candidate is put at ease and allowed to reenter the target language; 2) the level check, during which the interviewer checks the validity of the rating which he or she senses represents the speaker's proficiency based on performance during the warm-up; 3) the probes, during which the interviewer ascertains the candidate's ability to perform at the next higher level; and 4) the wind-down, during which the interviewer returns to more familiar structures and topics in an effort to end the interview with a feeling of success on the part of the candidate. During the interview, an interviewer may utilize prepared role-play situations as "level checks" or as "probes." These range from basic survival situations, to situations with a complication, to difficult situations and abstract linguistic tasks.

In the Hoechst program, participants interviewed to date report feeling at ease with the oral interview process, and cite the importance of the opportunity for extended individual conversation in building confidence, especially when the interviewer is not their classroom instructor. In materials design, this same device offers the business program a valuable opportunity to define and focus learning on the basis of participants' immediate needs and past experience. Participants in the Hoechst program have become interested in creating and practicing role-play situations based on their work and business travel experience. Thus the instructor can more effectively design curriculum and plan day-to-day instruction, and participants can more readily understand and take part in the structuring of the materials and activities. There are additional benefits to the trainer-instructor. The oral interview can function as an assessment tool for placement and for the evaluation of an individual's progress. And it can be used in evaluating objectives and overall program effectiveness, in organiz-

ing program design, and in selecting materials and media.

The impact on curriculum, methods, and materials is significant. For the participant-learner, proficiency-based instruction leads to a more efficient, structured curriculum, as well as to increased understanding of and participation in the learning process. For example, in addition to using the oral interview as a rating procedure, the trainer can use the taped interview to analyze and discuss performance with the learner, assessing strengths and weaknesses. This enables both learner and trainer to evaluate progress and to establish objectives for further training.

Immediate benefits to a corporation include the ability to quantify both the individual participant's progress and the effectiveness of the training program. Potential long-range corporate applications include the use of proficiency-based criteria in job descriptions and advertisements, hiring procedures, performance appraisal, international relocation and project planning, and management education and organizational productivity. The goal of the corporate language training program is, of course, to make personnel more proficient in the target language and therefore more successful in their foreign language-related tasks. A natural application of the ACTFL Proficiency Projects, and of the oral proficiency interview in particular, is to facilitate effective, appropriate language training and skills assessment in business and the professions.

There is no way to quantify the competitive edge and the respect accorded the businessperson able and willing to converse with foreign counterparts in their native language. Yet while proficiency in a foreign language is desirable, it alone does not guarantee success in international business. In *New Facts About Japanese and Americans*, Howard Van Zandt states that for international businesspeople, accomplishments and personal contentment "are in direct proportion to the amount of time they give to the studying of the foreign country in which they work. The ambitious ones, therefore, devote a substantial part of their spare time to learning about the history, geography, language, politics, economy, customs, and manners of the host country."⁴

A significant concept validated in the ACTFL Proficiency Projects is that knowledge of the other culture is a legitimate skill area. In this context, the oral proficiency interview is not only an exercise with linguistic value, but also one with cultural value. If the simulated situations are vehicles for practicing appropriate strategies for interacting

with speakers of the target language, and if, as in the Hoechst program, the oral interview encourages language users to converse more readily and confidently with native speakers, we can assume that not only will foreign language proficiency increase, but that greater receptivity to foreign cultures and greater facility to act appropriately in these cultures will also emerge.

Conclusion

The profession is fortunate to be able to build on extensive government experience in measuring language proficiency. By taking advantage of this experience, we will be able to articulate the learning process for language learners/users throughout their academic and professional careers. Only by quantifying in a useful way the actual language needs of these learners and by providing effective foreign language instruction will we be able to credibly market foreign language skills not only within academia, but to "end users" in business, industry, and the professions. When skills and skills requirements are more precisely defined and evaluated, and when curricula and materials can be designed accordingly, based on a recognized (inter)national standard, the job advertisements cited above might read like this:

"Applicant should have Superior/Level 3 (ACTFL/ILR) oral proficiency in one or more of the following languages." "Must have ILR level 5 skills in all areas." "Writing and listening comprehension in Portuguese at Level 2/Advanced (ILR/ACTFL) preferred." "ILR Level 4 skills in both German/English necessary." "Level Intermediate High/1+ (ACTFL/ILR) oral and reading skills in Arabic/Hebrew required."

It is time we learn to speak a single language about foreign language proficiency.

NOTES

¹Pardee Lowe, Jr., *Manual for LS Interview Workshops* (Washington, DC: CIA Language School, 1980), pp. 1-4.

²John B. Carroll, "Foreign Language Proficiency Levels Attained by Language Majors Near Graduation from College," *Foreign Language Annals*, 1 (1967), 131-51.

³Marianne Lehr Adams, "Five Concurring Factors in Speaking Proficiency," in *Measuring Spoken Language Proficiency*, ed. James R. Frith (Washington, DC: Georgetown Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 1-6.

⁴Howard Van Zandt, *New Facts About Japanese and Americans* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle), pp. 5-6.