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**ATTAINING HIGH LEVELS OF PROFICIENCY:
CHALLENGES FOR LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES**

**Margaret E. Malone
Center for Applied Linguistics**

**Benjamin Rifkin
University of Wisconsin, Madison**

**Donna Christian and Dora E. Johnson
Center for Applied Linguistics**

Introduction

Recent events have highlighted America's security, military, diplomatic, and business needs 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 percent 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 recent developments for many languages, but the challenge is 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 procedures 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 the "3" or higher levels according to the 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” (ACTFL, 1999), while a learner at the higher “Distinguished” level “begins to approach the level of an educated native speaker” (Leaver and Shekhtman, 2002). In addition to requiring a great deal of language proficiency, a speaker at these levels must also possess academic skills, such as the abilities to hypothesize and persuade, and discourse skills that any educated person in the target culture would have acquired.

The U.S. postsecondary educational system offers opportunities for students to develop language proficiency through language and cultural studies, including literature. However, the typical undergraduate program offers only three contact hours per week, which after two years yields, at most, 180 hours of instruction. Development of even the Advanced level of proficiency can take up to 720 hours; for the Superior level in a language such as Russian, the minimum number of hours is 1320, according to estimates of the Foreign Service Institute (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 advanced level, let alone from advanced to superior or higher. However, there are several possible approaches or combinations to developing high-level language learners from 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; and providing intensive immersion experiences for students at the postsecondary level, including overseas study in a target-language culture. 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 high-level speakers of foreign languages, we must expand the numbers of Americans studying foreign languages, especially the LCTLs and offer the types of some classroom and out-of-classroom experiences (in the United States and/or overseas) that help individual learners build high levels of expertise. Some approaches that may further this goal include:

- Intensive summer institutes, such as those offered by Middlebury College
- Extending curricular offerings, especially in professional subject matter areas
- 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
- Materials targeted for upper-level students, such as computer-mediated tutorials to teach Advanced skills in Russian developed at the University of Wisconsin-Madison
- Comprehensive programs in selected languages, such as those supported by the National Flagship Programs

Technology

A number of different technologies, including distance-learning courses, encourage and support the development and maintenance of high levels of proficiency, as well as approaches that rely on the World Wide Web for bringing 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 area 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 as well as K-12) maintained by the Center for Advanced Research in Language Acquisition at the University of Minnesota, making it possible to find 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 test 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, but many remain. 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.

A case study: what works in Russian

Russian is one LCTL in which some students have achieved success in attaining 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
- 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:

- Availability, affordability and feasibility of *effective pedagogical approaches* such as intensive language programs in the U.S. and abroad for many students. For example, 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 (K-12 as well as university faculty).
- Although *technology* can improve the efficiency of language learning and can increase the numbers 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 in many languages for the full course sequence are still unavailable.
- Few *assessments* are available to test high levels of language proficiency in many languages for listening, speaking, reading and writing skills.
- Currently, there are few, if any *incentives* for students to study LCTLs, nor are there adequate incentives to institutions to offer LCTLs.

Recommendations

Language education has made progress toward increasing student proficiency in many languages, through technology, materials and resource centers, as noted throughout the paper. Although more progress is still 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 national interests. In order to increase the pool of students who complete language programs with high levels of proficiency, we must have a pool of learners from which we can draw. Currently, we need to increase the size of that pool of learners. 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
- 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 area has already been felt, and the situation will become even more urgent if sufficient planning and funds are not allocated to develop a language-proficient society that includes individuals with high levels of proficiency in particular languages.

References

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