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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the present potential impact of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) and Proficiency Guidelines on classroom teaching and curriculum design argues that proficiency-oriented instruction cannot and should not claim to be a new method for foreign language teaching. Although many teachers find that training in proficiency testing has an immediate and substantial impact on their classroom teaching, this impact is neither revolutionary nor unique to a proficiency orientation. Experience with proficiency concepts improves the teacher's ability to observe language use critically and pushes teachers to direct their classrooms toward purposeful communication in all four skill areas.
Proficiency-oriented teaching is attractive because it embodies and builds on ideas from a variety of approaches, epecially communicative teaching. A proficiency-based curriculum starts with outcomes but does not prescribe practices. Most important, proficiency teaching brings teachers to a common dialogue, leading to reflection on and debate of issues in the theory and practice of second-language learning and teaching. (MSE)

1 Proficiency in Perspective in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Introduction

Interest in proficiency testing is encouraging enthusiastic discussion about refocusing foreign language courses on functional language use. This discussion is reaching administrators, curriculum planners, and material developers, as well as classroom teachers, despite strong warnings that it is premature, if not outright dangerous, to base curricular change on the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview testing procedure (OPI) and at least the 1982 provisional version of the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* (Bachman and Savignon, 5; Savignon, 49; Van Patten, 58).

This article will examine the present and the potential impact of the OPI and *Guidelines* on classroom teaching and curriculum design, to argue that proficiency-oriented instruction cannot and should not claim to be a new *method* for foreign language teaching. In fact, many teachers find that, although training in proficiency testing does have an immediate and substantial impact on their classroom teaching, from a broader perspective this impact is for the most part neither revolutionary nor unique to a proficiency orientation. Many techniques, and even certain course design features, advocated for proficiency-oriented instruction have been widely discussed with regard to teaching for communicative competence.

There are two notions associated with proficiency-oriented teaching, however, that are highly controversial: the role of error correction in the classroom and the hierarchical ordering of functions, content areas, and structural features in the syllabus. Although proficiency does not provide us with a new and different methodology, experience with proficiency concepts has a major impact on our teaching in that it sensitizes us to differences between what we teach and what our students master for actual use outside our classrooms, an understanding that brings important insights and much enthusiasm and debate to our profession.

Background to the OPI and Proficiency Guidelines

In 1979 the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies (54) urged the foreign language teaching profession to develop a means of evaluating students' ability in foreign language beyond the traditional measures of courses taken and grades received. In response to these calls the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and the Educational Testing Service (ETS) worked with educators in academia and in the government language schools to restructure the oral interview and related guidelines of government language schools for use in academia (Liskin-Gasparro, 32; Hiple, 23). This effort has given us an oral interview procedure and a set of generic proficiency guidelines in four modalities (reading, listening, speaking, and writing) intended for evaluation of foreign language proficiency of upper high school and university students. In the future, we can expect to see proficiency tests also in reading, listening, and writing, and language-specific guidelines to accompany the generic set (Hiple, 23).

The OPI involves the global rating of a face-to-face conversation between a student and an ACTFL-certified tester; during this ten-to thirty-minute interview the tester provides the student with the opportunity to discuss a number of topics, expressing a variety of functions in the foreign language.

The *Guidelines*, first circulated in provisional form in 1982 (3), were published in revised form in 1986 (2). They offer generic descriptions of typical competencies and patterns of weakness of foreign

language uses at each of nine proficiency levels in the four modalities. Like the OPI, they are intended for purposes of evaluation.

The OPI and the *Guidelines* are having a powerful impact in academia. Dandonoli (13) points out that since the first ACTFL/ETS proficiency workshop in 1982, over 1500 individuals have participated in OPI tester workshops sponsored by ACTFL, ETS, or both, and have received training in Arabic, Chinese, ESL, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish, and, through special provisions, in Hindi, Swahili, Hausa, and other less-commonly taught languages. The April 1986 list of ACTFL-certified testers included 101 testers in French, 74 in Spanish, 43 in German, plus testers in other languages.

Indeed, as shown in my recent survey of uses of the OPI in French (Magnan, 36), this test procedure is rapidly becoming a nationally recognized test for use at major points in the curriculum, such as college entrance, completion of college language requirements, and prior to certification as a foreign language teacher. Despite serious concerns over the appropriateness of the OPI procedure and the *ACTFL Provisional Guidelines* too large to be discussed here (Bachman and Savignon, 5; Lantolf and Frawley, 30; Savignon, 49), our profession is clearly moving toward proficiency testing as a means of improving its accountability within academia and beyond.

Proficiency Testing in Our Current National Framework

The demand from legislators and consumers for increased accountability through proficiency testing is certainly not unique to the foreign language discipline. There is a pervasive national concern for higher standards in education, for increasing the literary knowledge, writing skills, and mathematical ability of our students, that is driving us rapidly toward proficiency testing and curriculum renewal. Most noted, perhaps, are the recent Holmes (55) and Carnegie (39) reports that call for more rigorous teacher preparation through requiring a bachelor's degree with heavy concentration on liberal arts and the major field of study plus a subsequent year of work in education and extensive field experience prior to professional teacher certification. When we consider interest in proficiency testing and curriculum renewal in foreign languages as part of a far-reaching national trend toward accountability

and improvement in education, we can perhaps understand more clearly the rather ardent desire to look toward proficiency as a new mode of language teaching for the 1980s and beyond.

Current Impact on our Curriculum

The impact of testing for proficiency is now reaching instruction. ACTFL has conducted several programs (for example, those at Middlebury, Pennsylvania State University, Bergen (N.J.) Community College, and North Colorado State University) that extend proficiency concepts to the curriculum (Dandonoli, 14). After experience with oral proficiency testing, Cole and Miller (9), Hirsch (24), and Kaplan (27) have revised course objectives in their respective high school, two-year college, and university level courses. Cummins (12) reports twenty-two states that currently have initiatives underway recommending state or local articulation and/or curriculum proficiency standards and guidelines based in some form on the *Guidelines*. Professional literature offers several volumes devoted to proficiency that discuss curricular implications (Higgs, 21; James, 25; Omaggio, 41), and a methodology text that details proficiency-oriented instruction (Omaggio, 42). It is thus undeniable that concepts from proficiency testing currently extend into classroom teaching.

This is not surprising, given the natural desire of teachers to direct their students toward strong performance on important examinations, as long as directed teaching does not compromise the test results (Lignan, 36), and considering that the OPI measures an ability that is currently valued as a goal of instruction—functional oral use of the target language. Nonetheless, many scholars caution against directly applying these principles of proficiency testing to the curriculum, since the OPI and the *Guidelines* are oriented to the product of learning rather than the learning process (Galloway, 15; also, Byrnes, 8; Medley, 37; Schulz, 50). We must remember that the sole express purpose of proficiency testing is to test an outcome, not to prescribe how to teach.

Higgs (20) agrees that notions of proficiency evaluation should not translate into a new "method" of teaching. He suggests, however, that proficiency may offer an "organizing principle" for instruction. As we hear of "a proficiency orientation," "proficiency-oriented approaches,"

and "proficiency-based instruction" in announcements for workshops, conferences, and textbooks, the differences between "method" and "organizing principle" may seem unclear. Although direct application of the OPI procedure and the *Guidelines* to the classroom is not appropriate, the bottom line is that we may draw implications from the OPI and the *Guidelines* that direct us toward useful innovation in our teaching. These innovations are shaped by our individual needs, desires, and instructional situations through the general theme of promoting language use in context (Galloway, 15).

Three Key Components of a Teaching Method

Building on Anthony's 1963 analysis (4), Richards (43) offers a useful description of how a teaching method is composed of three interrelated components, or levels of organization: approach, design, and procedure. Approach involves the theoretical foundation—the beliefs about the nature of language and language learning that underlie what teachers do to foster learning in their classrooms. Design involves relationships between these theories of language and language learning and the form and function of instructional materials and activities. The level of procedure includes day-to-day classroom techniques and practices and the use of time, space, and equipment to implement these practices. The three components—approach, design, and procedure—need not be developed in any specific order. Rather, a method may begin to be formulated on any of the three levels and then be extended to the other two through the natural interrelationship among the components.

At present, the influence of proficiency on the curriculum is basically limited to the levels of procedure and design. Before implications can be justly extended to the level of approach as well, considerable empirical research is needed.

Teaching for Proficiency: On the Level of Procedure

It is on the level of procedure, the day-to-day teacher practices, classroom activities, and use of resources, that we actually put into practice notions from proficiency testing. These adaptations are often

directly related to experience with the OPI and thus deal primarily with speaking and, to a lesser extent, listening. As Byrnes (8) points out, teachers who observe numerous oral proficiency interviews become more conscious of how students perform in a foreign language in a nonclassroom situation. When teachers become sensitized in a new way to the results of their teaching, they naturally think of ways to adapt their teaching in hopes of helping students perform even better. Furthermore, when teacher-testers experience tactics and activities that encourage good student performance in the testing situation, they naturally hope that similar tactics and activities will promote equally good results in the classroom. Thus, as teachers are taught to be testers, there is a natural tendency for them to use what they have learned to become better teachers.

Teacher Tactics

1. Normal Rate of Speech. Testers typically speak at a fairly normal rate and do not limit their vocabulary and structures to fit a particular curriculum. Comprehension is ensured through repetition and rephrasing, as necessary. Following experience with the OPI, teachers become more acutely aware of the vast difference between students' ability to speak and their ability to understand. They thus worry less often about speaking slowly and limiting their language to the productive level of their students' language.

In discussing the impact of proficiency notions on the classroom, Bragger (6) similarly suggests that, when communicating with students in skill-using activities, teachers should generally maintain a normal rate of speech provided that students can understand the general message. Such practice, of course, concurs with techniques of Krashen's and Terrell's Natural Approach (28), which advocates acquisition through extensive comprehensible input: exposing students to a great variety of words and structures at a level slightly above the students' own level of competence ($i + 1$), provided that the message is comprehensible.

2. Longer Wait Time. In order to encourage students to work through linguistic difficulties to express their own thoughts and to speak at length, testers give students considerable time to formulate what they want to say in response to each question. Testers generally tend not to

hurry or help students by repeating the questions several times, offering words, or finishing phrases, but rather wait out the silence—asking another question only when it becomes obvious the student cannot say anything more on the topic. Through this longer struggle to put thoughts into words, many students often produce more complex and creative answers than they typically would during rapid-paced classroom questioning.

Bragger (6) and Galloway (15) suggest that students would benefit from a similar practice in the classroom. Language learning research indicates that the wait time in our classes may be too short. Shrum (52) found the mean time between teacher question and student response in first-year Spanish and French classes to be only 1.9 seconds. White and Lightbown (60) had similar findings with FSL classes, showing the average wait time to be an inadequate 2.1 seconds. In contrast to this harsh reality, Shrum cites research by Rowe (46) and Craik and Lockhart (11) to suggest a wait time over five seconds, and White and Lightbown suggest five to ten seconds. To date there has been no such measurement of how long testers wait for answers in the OPI, but testers often comment that it feels like a very long time, much longer than they typically wait in class.

3. **Longer Response Time.** In addition to having a longer wait time before students begin their answers, experience with the OPI encourages longer response time for students to complete their answers. OPI testers tend not to interrupt students, be it to encourage them with a well-used "good," to correct the accuracy of the utterance, or to help them by supplying or modeling expressions. Instead, OPI testers encourage students to pursue the communication by making short, meaningful comments such as "Really?" "I see," or "Tell me more." The natural response of the tester who is reacting to content rather than form is usually met by a natural response from the student who chooses to communicate in either partial sentences or chunks of sentences, rather than in single, complete sentences.

4. **Minimal Correction in "Free" Communication.** As already mentioned, testers are instructed not to correct students during the OPI interview, whether through overt correction or more subtle remodeling of the proper form. Direct application of this principle to the classroom

should encourage activities without external concern for accuracy imposed by the teacher.

It is interesting to note, however, that teaching for proficiency has been associated with insistence on a high degree of grammatical correctness. Bachman and Savignon (5), Savignon (49), and Van Patten (58) express concern that advocates of proficiency have a dangerous preoccupation with grammatical correctness that is not supported by research in second-language acquisition and that is in conflict with notions of teaching for communicative competence. This preoccupation stems from Higgs and Clifford's (22) belief that uncorrected errors will become fossilized, thereby making it difficult, if not impossible, for students to attain superior proficiency. Citing Higgs and Clifford, Omaggio (42, p. 273) states in her third hypothesis for proficiency-oriented teaching that "there should be a concern for the development of linguistic accuracy from the beginning of instruction."

It is quite clear from the rating scale for the OPI and from the ACTFL *Guidelines* that superior speakers must have the grammar of the language well under control, i.e., they may have no patterns of error in basic grammatical structures. This absolute criterion of grammatical accuracy is not, however, found at the lower proficiency levels, where weaknesses in grammatical accuracy can be more easily compensated for by strengths in other areas, such as extensive vocabulary and, especially, the ability to communicate successfully on a range of topics. The argument that accuracy should be a major concern for the classroom is aimed, then, at preparing students to attain superior speaking ability, a level beyond the reach of our undergraduate majors (Magnan, 36).

There are, then, several key questions. Should we teach toward a goal of superior speaking ability? If we do desire to teach toward superior ability, is rigorous correction a must throughout the curriculum, since grammatical control is ultimately required, or will grammatical control perhaps develop better through attention to the message rather than to the form of the utterance? If we do decide to place strong emphasis on grammatical form in our classrooms, will we be discouraging the development of the communicative ability that we hope to foster?

Research in learner interlanguage since the early 1970s finds learner errors to be a natural and necessary part of the hypothesis-testing process that leads learners to the ability to communicate

effectively (for overview, see Richards, 44). Strategies for communicative teaching (Savignon, 47 and 48) thus deemphasize the importance that audio-lingualism placed on grammatical accuracy in order to encourage freedom for students to experiment with communication and thereby increase their ability to speak at more length and impart more information.

The role that grammatical accuracy should play in a proficiency-oriented classroom is, in reality, a question of proportion and balance: how often should we place our students in a risk-taking, communicative situation where errors are likely to occur; and when errors do occur, how much, when, and how are we to correct them? In describing teaching from the perspective of proficiency, Galloway (15) suggests moderate risk-taking as optimal. Omaggio (42) agrees, seeing the sequence of exercises as crucial in preparing students to enter into communicative activities with less risk of errors. Bragger (6) refers to Rivers's (45) distinction between skill-getting activities and skill-using activities and suggests a similar emphasis on correction in early skill-getting stages and less or no teacher intervention later in creative skill-using activities. It would seem, then, that a proficiency orientation suggests a sequence of activities from the highly structured with rigorous correction to the more open-ended with less teacher intervention. It is, then, the latter communicative activities where, as in the OPI, minimizing teacher correction is advisable in order to promote extended communication.

Such careful attention to when to correct classroom errors in order to achieve an appropriate balance between attention to form and attention to meaning is certainly not restricted to a proficiency orientation. I, among others, have suggested such a hierarchy for correction as good judgment in communicative teaching (Magnan, 34). It remains an unanswered question, however, to what degree advocates of proficiency-oriented teaching and advocates of communicative teaching agree or disagree on the issue of error correction from the practical standpoint of day-to-day implementation in their classrooms. In fact, if we entered many so-called "proficiency-oriented" and "communicative" classrooms and studied error-correction techniques, we would likely find overlapping ranges of frequency of risk-taking activities and overt attention to correct grammatical form. Proficiency-oriented teaching has

indeed been associated with rigor in grammatical correctness, but this concern for accuracy at upper proficiency levels should be seen as neither absolute nor so pervasive that it limits communicative language use in lower-level classes.

Classroom Activities

As teachers have found that elicitation tactics used in the OPI can also be useful teacher tactics for their classrooms, they have also found that tasks from the OPI offer valuable sources of classroom learning activities.

1. Listing. The main novice-level functions are listing and naming. Once the pressure is off to have students always answer in complete sentences, it is easy to devise activities in which beginning students create lists: of things to buy, of jobs to do, of items in their room, of favorite weekend activities. More advanced students can make lists in order to organize their thoughts and select vocabulary prior to doing more difficult tasks, such as narrating, describing, comparing, and explaining.

2. Role-Play. A situation or role-play, in which students ad-lib an interaction that might occur in the target culture, is a mandatory component of the OPI for intermediate speakers and an optional component for advanced and superior speakers. Indeed, teachers find the role-plays highly versatile, practical, and motivating tools for pair and small-group work, and textbooks use them as summation activities to integrate structural, lexical, and cultural notions for functional practice.

Doing role-plays or short sketches on topics of personal and cultural interest is, again, not new to a proficiency orientation. Zelson (62), for example, demonstrated the value of such interactions for developing communicative ability. What the proficiency framework brings to the role-plays is insight on what makes some situations easier or more difficult than others, through imposition of a hierarchy of performance tasks which range from asking and answering questions in an uncomplicated tourist-type interaction (intermediate level), to explaining at some length in a similar situation but with a complication (advanced level), to persuading, arguing, or demanding in a situation that extends beyond daily social interaction to professional or unfamiliar areas (superior level).

3 **Paraphrase and Circumlocution.** OPI testers consider lacunae in vocabulary as opportunities for students to demonstrate ability to paraphrase and use circumlocution. Teachers who work with the OPI thus become highly sensitive to the communicative benefits of these techniques. In their classroom, they systematically have students offer paraphrases or circumlocutions for unknown vocabulary and do exercises to practice these communicative strategies (Galloway, 15).

4. **Retelling Stories and Debating Issues.** These two activities, common during OPI testing on the advanced and superior levels, respectively, are mentioned by Bragger (6) as techniques to be practiced in the proficiency-oriented classroom. Such activities are certainly not new, yet teachers experienced in OPI testing often give them an increased and different focus in their classrooms. Kaplan (27) suggests that asking students to describe a scene or tell a story is not enough. Students need to be taught *how* to describe and *how* to sequence events in narration.

5. **Oral Achievement Testing.** An increase in oral classroom activities, with a concomitant course objective regarding speaking ability, leads naturally to requiring students to take oral as well as written tests for evaluation of course work. The OPI itself, however, is highly inappropriate as a grading instrument, since it is a test of proficiency, rather than of achievement, whose scope cannot be limited to material covered in any particular course or sequence of courses. Furthermore, the global nature of its rating makes it unlikely for students within the same class to receive scores that adequately distinguish their mastery of course features.

Nonetheless, teachers can create oral classroom tests based on activities used in the OPI and can even analyze the components of the global OPI rating to develop their own classroom grading scale (Magnan, 35), or they can select and adapt from oral testing models offered previously within a framework of communicative testing (for example, Linder, 31). What is essential is that speaking tests be included in the curriculum and that these tests correspond to real-life tasks, to the daily challenges faced outside the classroom (Galloway, 15).

Briefly, then, on the level of procedure, teaching for proficiency means using tactics and techniques that encourage communication. The rhythm of the class varies, from mechanical drills with heavy correction

to interactive role-play, monologues of substantial length, and personalized communicative activities in which students take time to formulate and complete substantial answers and teachers impose their teacher presence less. Apart from disagreement on the importance of grammatical accuracy, teaching for proficiency and teaching for communicative competence share remarkable similarities at the level of procedure.

A Note on Listening, Reading, and Writing

It would be unjust to give the impression that a proficiency orientation is concerned only with speaking, even at present when the speaking skill dominates through influence of the OPI. Many teachers extrapolate from experiences with OPI, through the aid of the *Guidelines* in the other skills areas, to develop new procedures and adapt old ones for teaching listening, reading, and writing. These techniques tend to favor process rather than product, including priming activities that prepare students for the actual task of listening, reading, or writing, interactive work throughout the main teaching module, and a follow-up phase involving peer checking and/or personal reactions (for examples, see Omaggio, 42).

Teaching for Proficiency: On the Level of Design

As at the level of procedure, we find similarities between proficiency-oriented teaching and communicative teaching, particularly concerning the roles of learner, teacher, and materials. One issue, however, is particularly controversial: the notion of a hierarchy of tasks based on the *Guidelines* to be used to develop course objectives and related course syllabuses. At the level of design, the *Guidelines* offer more impact on the curriculum than does OPI procedure. Thus, impact at this level tends to involve all four skills, rather than to focus mainly on speaking. For lack of instructional materials, however, relatively few of these suggestions have as yet been put into practice. Nonetheless, their implications are far-reaching and need to be supported by research at the level of approach, that is, research into how foreign languages are learned.

Objectives and the Syllabus. Proficiency clearly refers to how well

students can put their language skills to use: how well they can function in a target community. Thus the primary objective of a proficiency orientation is to build students' ability to use language in authentic contexts (Omaggio, 42).

More controversial is the suggestion that the *Guidelines* offer a hierarchy of functions and contexts that can be used to create specific functional objectives across sequences of courses. Omaggio (42, p. 35) states:

> The guidelines are [. . .] ideally suited for organizing instruction because they are progressive in nature. Knowing what kinds of competencies lie at the *next* level will help us sequence materials and choose activities.

It is thus mainly in this sense of ordering linguistic functions and content that proficiency is offered as an "organizing principle" for instruction, a notion with which several scholars strongly take issue (Bachman and Savignon, 5; Lantolf and Frawley, 30; Savignon, 49; Van Patten, 58).

The government forerunners of the ACTFL *Guidelines* were created from observation of American government workers attempting to use foreign languages in Europe. Since the *Guidelines* are based on synchronic observational data and not longitudinal, developmental data, it may be dangerous to assume that the hierarchy of functions, content, and accuracy features found in the level descriptions of the *Guidelines* parallels the natural order of acquisition of these features.

We are indeed making a developmental claim when we suggest that it is easier or more natural for students to learn to list and memorize (novice level), before they learn to recombine memorized elements into novel utterances to create with language (intermediate level), or to create with language well in present time before they consistently construct coherent, lengthy narratives about concrete events in present, past, and future time (advanced level), and finally sustain extended support, opinion, and hypothesis statements concerning abstract notions (superior level). We may very well be making a major mistake if we teach for absolute control of functions and contents described at a particular proficiency level before we move on to functions and contents of the next proficiency level. In fact, Omaggio (42) advises against such a

lock-step approach, preferring that we occasionally introduce material from slightly higher proficiency ranges in order to prepare students for progress up the proficiency scale.

The practice of tailoring course material to proficiency level is complicated by the interaction of the four skills. If, as we generally believe, students naturally progress more rapidly in the receptive skills, listening and reading, than in the productive skills, speaking and writing, we should perhaps think in terms of different syllabuses for each skill or pair of skills that we follow concurrently with our students. Galloway (15), in fact, refines Omaggio's notion of introducing material from slightly higher proficiency levels to suggest teaching at higher levels in listening and reading than in speaking and writing so that students first acquire vocabulary and structure for recognition and then, on a subsequent learning cycle, bring these recognition skills into productive use. The question of the degree, if any, to which we should sequence our course objectives according to the hierarchy of function and content presented in the *Guidelines* needs to be substantiated by empirical research data.

Perhaps because, as Valdman (56) points out, speech acts and linguistic functions have no inherent order, the literature concerning proficiency-oriented instruction tends to discuss how to use a grammar-based syllabus to build functional skills (Omaggio, 42; Galloway, 15). Grammar does offer some logical notion of task hierarchy, but the use of a grammar-based syllabus is problematic in a course whose primary focus is functional practice, since as Genesee (16) observes we cannot yet match specific linguistic structures with specific language functions. Furthermore, grammar-based syllabuses are generally associated with teaching for conceptual knowledge rather than functional use and with covering a rather large amount of material in a comparatively short period of time.

Advocates of proficiency-oriented instruction frequently comment on how to alter expectations when teaching for functional language use with a grammar-based syllabus. Heilenman and Kaplan (18) and Galloway (15) wisely insist on the difference between material that is taught and material that is learned, used, and internalized. This leads Heilenman and Kaplan to propose the notion of different levels of control (full, partial, and conceptual) to be expected at different points in

the course syllabus. They explain that a cyclical syllabus, proposed by Corder (10) in 1973, allows students to reexperience structural, as well as semantic and functional features, in a systematic fashion, deepening their mastery of them with each exposure and promoting development from one proficiency level to the next in a spiral fashion. A cyclical syllabus also maximizes the tendency noted earlier for students to be at higher proficiency level in listening and reading than in speaking and writing, promoting acquisition in listening and reading during early instructional phases and acquisition in speaking and writing during later phases.

A cyclical syllabus also responds to the observation that in any given class there is a range of student ability that overlaps with the ranges found in both the preceding and the subsequent level (Magnan, 36). As students generally do not demonstrate equal levels of proficiency in all four modalities, students in the same class do not demonstrate equal levels of proficiency in any one skill. Clearly, a syllabus that incorporates spiraling cycles of presentation, review, and expansion responds well to this diversity.

The issue of time devoted to covering certain material, especially the traditional first-year college or two-year high school grammar sequence, is central to notions of teaching for proficiency. A well-developed cyclical syllabus that encourages separate, yet related, development of the four skills for functional use demands more time to teach than a linear syllabus that emphasizes conceptual control with similar expectations in each skill. This observation has, of course, already been made, rather convincingly, by advocates of communicative teaching (Valdman and Warriner-Burke, 57). Advocates of proficiency renew the cry to spread out "introductory" grammar over a longer instructional sequence. Fortunately, we are beginning to see some favorable response to this time-grammar dilemma. The new Wisconsin foreign language curriculum guide for secondary teaching (17), for example, based in part on the ACTFL *Guidelines*, advocates that more time be devoted to the initial grammar sequence.

The corollary to reducing the grammar scope of first- and second-year classes is naturally to include more grammar, or other language study, in upper-level classes. Galloway (15, p. 56) puts it well: "Proficiency-based decisions regarding grammar scope must be geared

to reducing where there is overestimation, enriching where there is underestimation, and sequencing for use." If we include less grammar in introductory courses, we should have more time to develop the four skills, thereby bringing listening and reading more in line with speaking and writing. The bridge to intermediate courses, with traditional emphasis on reading and writing, would then be smoother: both introductory and intermediate courses would emphasize all four skills fairly equally with the study of grammar running through them at a slower, more even pace. Such curriculum planning would help guard against a potentially unfavorable extremist influence that enthusiasm for oral proficiency might have on our curriculum and encourage instead more systematic development of all four skills (Schulz, 50; Herron, 19). In a publication by the College Board (1), we are indeed encouraged to guard against a schism between language and literature courses. A four-skills proficiency orientation encourages us to work more language into literature courses and more literature into language courses to find a more appropriate balance in our overall curriculum.

Finally, we must recognize and act upon the fact that if students are to attain superior proficiency, especially in the productive skills, our sequence of courses needs to include a substantial period of study abroad (Bragger, 6). During this time in the target community, the linguistic features that students had mastered for partial control in the classroom would develop into full control.

2. Role of the Learner. In a proficiency framework, as in a communicative one, the learner is to be a performer, an initiator, a problem-solver—a user of language. Citing Nerenz and Knop's (40) study on the effect of group size on students' opportunities to use language, Galloway (15) advises that students work in pairs and small groups, interacting to solve problems and exchange information in the target language.

Thus the role of learners in a proficiency orientation echoes that in a communicative approach as described by Breen and Candlin (7): negotiators between the self and the learning-process who contribute as much as they gain and thereby learn in an independent way. Self-directed learning, with guidance, is indeed appropriate for a classroom in which ranges of proficiency for different students and different skills are recognized and supported.

3. Role of the Teacher. A proficiency orientation tends to view the teacher as guide, catalyst, diagnostician, and consultant. Cole and Miller (9), who reworked their entire high school program on principles of proficiency, offer two guiding principles for teachers: ensure maximum student involvement and incorporate the maximum variety of activities in a class period.

Yet, the notions of imparting grammar rules, be it through deductive or inductive means, and of error correction by the teacher also suggest a teacher-directed classroom, at least in certain portions of each lesson. It seems, then, that we return to a rather eclectic view of the role of the teacher who assumes different roles in accordance with the different objectives of each part of the lesson.

4. Instructional Materials. Advocates of proficiency-oriented and communicative teaching alike call for the use of authentic materials—written texts, recordings, visuals that are rich in the culture of the target community. Although the cultural component of the 1982 *Provisional Guidelines* (3) was not retained in the 1986 version (2), cultural knowledge and sensitivity remain important in frameworks for proficiency-based teaching (Galloway, 15; Omaggio; 42; and Bragger, 6). Ideally, a proficiency-oriented framework should take into account Strasheim's (53) declaration: Foreign language skills provide the medium of instruction and culture is the message. Culture here should be considered in its broadest sense, including knowledge of sociopolitical, historical and contemporary facts, daily life and tourist situations, and an understanding and appreciation of literary and artistic heritage.

Obviously, such materials do not exist. In fact, considering the uncertainty about the framework of the syllabus, they are not yet even clearly defined. As Walz (59) illustrates, most textbooks today are organized around grammatical structures from a written point of view. They tend to teach about language as much as, if not more than, they show how language is used, in either spoken or written form. Culture and literature are most often included as "extras" in cultural notes and readings at the end of chapters. To truly implement the design component of any eventual method of teaching for proficiency, we would need extensive development of instructional material.

Teaching for Proficiency: At the Level of Approach

Proficiency-oriented instruction cannot be described at the level of approach, since the OPI and the *Guidelines* are not aligned with a coherent, tested theory of language and second-language learning. As Lalande (29) recalls, the curricular models based on proficiency are derived from data, rather than from theory.

Richards (43) explains that at least three different theoretical views of language underlie current popular language teaching methods: structural, functional, and interactional. At the levels of design and procedure, a proficiency-orientation borrows from all three: structural in its currently accepted syllabus and perhaps in its attention to accuracy; functional in its emphasis on conveying meaning and on natural language usage in situation; and interactional in certain activities and definition of the roles of learner and teacher that promote communicative exchange. For now, then, proficiency-oriented teaching can make claims only at the levels of procedure and design. Serious research relating the development of principles of proficiency to second-language acquisition theory are clearly needed before proficiency-oriented teaching can be defined on the level of approach, and thus be considered a "method" in the full sense.

In this regard, we find a striking contrast between proficiency-oriented teaching and communicative teaching—which has, according to Richards (43), been developed on all three levels: initially at the level of approach in the late 1970s/early 1980s (Wilkins; 61; Breen and Candlin, 7), and then at the levels of design (Munby, 38) and procedure (Littlewood, 33; Johnson, 26).

Conclusion: The Reality and Hopes of Proficiency

What, then, does proficiency offer the classroom teacher, if not a unified method for foreign language teaching? Primarily, proficiency offers an oral testing procedure and eventually a testing program in all four skills. This multi-skill evaluation program is crucial, for, as Byrnes (8) explains, it will furnish us from the start with an evaluation measure against which claims for teaching can be compared. Information from this testing program will help us establish realistic expectations for our

students at each level of instruction, helping us to guard against promising unrealistic achievements in limited foreign language learning experiences (Schulz, 51).

With regard to teaching, experience with proficiency concepts improves our ability to observe language use in a critical way and, through our observations, pushes us to direct our classrooms toward purposeful communication in all four modalities. Our classrooms tend to welcome eclecticism in a communicative vein, with choices of techniques and materials dependent upon on our personal styles as teachers and the interests and needs of our students. Perhaps this is why proficiency-oriented teaching is so attractive to many of us. It embodies and builds on ideas from a variety of teaching approaches, including especially communicative teaching, that we have used successfully in whole or in part. As Heilenman and Kaplan (18) rightly insist, a proficiency-based curriculum starts with outcomes; it does not prescribe practices.

Most importantly perhaps, proficiency brings us to a common dialogue, leading us to reflect upon and debate issues in the theory and practice of second-language learning and teaching. This dialogue is indeed rich and extends beyond European languages to include a range of African and Asian languages as well. Heilenman and Kaplan (18, p. 73) suggest that "proficiency, as an organizing principle, represents the first serious attempt at professional unity since the days of NDEA institutes and the comforting security of audiolingualism." The value of this enthusiasm and the potential richness of this dialogue are not to be underestimated. Through this dialogue we are bound to experience an enlightened perspective on foreign language learning and teaching.

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