

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

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Introduction

The need for individuals who can speak and understand languages other than English is acute in many sectors in the United States, from business and social services to national security and diplomacy. The September 26, 2001, report of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence (H.R. Rep. No. 107-219, 2001) identified language as the single greatest need in the intelligence community. The late Senator Paul Simon (2001) pointed out that "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."

Of the relatively small number of individuals in the United States who learn languages other than English, an even smaller number achieve a high level of proficiency in the language(s) they study. Developing a cadre of professionals with high levels of proficiency in both English and another language will require significantly greater resources than are currently allocated to language education and training, particularly in higher education.

This digest investigates the availability and adequacy of teaching methods and tools, information technologies, and testing procedures to help language learners achieve high levels of proficiency, and suggests ways to help develop highly proficient speakers of languages other than English in the United States.

Developing High Proficiency Levels

The term *high-level language learner* typically refers to an individual scoring at a level of 3 or higher on the 5-point Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) language proficiency rating scale or a level of *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 *Distinguished* level "begins to approach the level of an educated native speaker" (Leaver & Shekhtman, 2002). Speakers at these levels also possess the academic discourse skills that would be expected of any educated person in the target culture, such as the ability to hypothesize and persuade.

It can take up to 720 hours of instruction for a student to achieve proficiency at the ACTFL *Advanced* level (one level below *Superior*); for a native English speaker 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). However, typical undergraduate language programs at U.S. colleges and universities offer only 3 contact hours per week, which, after 2 years, yields at most 180 hours of instruction.

Pathways to Proficiency

There is little in the literature on how best to help language learners develop high levels of proficiency (see Coalition of Distinguished Language Centers, www.distinguishedlanguagecenters.org). We propose a number of possible approaches that could be taken:

- Build on the language background of heritage language speakers (i.e., those whose home or ancestral language is other than English).
- Start language learning early to build a strong basis for second, third, and even fourth language learning.
- Provide intensive immersion experiences for students at the post-secondary level, including overseas study in a target-language culture.

Pedagogical Approaches

We must expand the number of Americans studying foreign languages, especially the less commonly taught languages (i.e., languages other than French, German, Italian, and Spanish), and offer the types of classroom and out-of-classroom experiences that will help individual learners develop high levels of proficiency. These are some approaches that may further this goal:

- Offer intensive summer language institutes, such as those conducted by Middlebury College and the Southeast Asian Studies Summer Institute.
- Increase the number of courses offered in languages other than English, especially in professional subject matter areas such as engineering and business (see, e.g., Angelelli & Degueudre, 2002).
- Provide overseas study to immerse learners in the language and culture they are studying, such as programs in China that include content courses in Chinese and internships with Chinese organizations (see Kubler, 2002).
- Develop 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 (<http://imp.lss.wisc.edu/rails>).
- Offer comprehensive language programs that are designed specifically to promote high-level proficiency through on-campus and overseas experiences, such as those supported by the National Flagship Programs.

Technology

A number of technologies encourage and support the development and maintenance of high levels of language proficiency. The Internet brings authentic language and cultural experiences to students and provides opportunities for them to interact with native speakers, to access culturally appropriate and high-level reading and listening texts, and to conduct research in their areas of expertise. Distance learning can combine text, video, CD-ROM, and synchronous and asynchronous use of the Internet in effective ways, as exemplified by the advanced online courses for Chinese, Japanese, and Korean developed at the University of Hawaii (www.nflrc.hawaii.edu/project/399info.html).

Resources

The availability of resources to develop high-level proficiency, especially in the less commonly taught languages (LCTLs), remains limited, although several projects are addressing this challenge:

- Several federally funded language resource centers are focusing on increasing our knowledge about and resources for advanced language learning and teaching (<http://nflrc.msu.edu>).
- The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition at the University of Minnesota is developing and maintaining a database of LCTL course offerings (<http://carla.acad.umn.edu/LCTL>).
- The Language Materials Project at the University of California, Los Angeles (www.lmp.ucla.edu), provides an online bibliographic database of materials for more than 100 LCTLs.
- The International Research and Studies Program of the U.S. Department of Education holds an annual grant competition to fund projects to improve and strengthen instruction in modern foreign languages, area studies, and other international fields (www.ed.gov/programs/iegpsirs/index.html).

- Several conferences have brought together stakeholders from various branches of government, the education community, and commerce to examine language needs across American society (www.nlconference.org/docs/White_Paper.pdf).
- The Center for Advanced Study of Language is working to enhance the ability of federal employees across all agencies and branches to speak and understand other languages at high levels of proficiency (www.casl.umd.edu).
- The National Flagship Language Initiative has awarded grants to support the teaching and learning of Arabic, Chinese, Korean, and Russian at universities recognized as leaders in language education (www.casl.umd.edu/nfli).
- The Defense Language Transformation Roadmap was created by the Department of Defense to increase language and cultural expertise among the officer, civilian, and enlisted ranks (www.defense.gov/news/Mar2005/d20050330roadmap.pdf).

Assessments

To measure our success in developing high levels of language proficiency, we must find ways to determine when learners have reached these levels. Although assessments that measure high levels of proficiency exist, most are not widely available. For example, opportunities to learn how to administer the U.S. government's oral proficiency interview (OPI) are limited. Similarly, a number of U.S. government agencies' tests for listening and reading beyond the ACTFL *Superior* level are not released for reasons of national security and cannot be administered to university students.

A few initiatives are beginning to fill some of these gaps. For example, the Center for Applied Linguistics is developing Web-delivered tests of listening and reading proficiency in Arabic and Russian that will assess proficiency from the *Novice* through *Superior* levels (www.cal.org/projects/webtest). But many gaps remain.

A Case Study: What Works in Russian

Russian is one LCTL in which programs exist that help students attain 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 literature
- Extended residency in Russia after graduation

Unfortunately, this full course sequence is offered at very few institutions of higher education. In particular, 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. It is important to note that even in full-sequence programs, not all students attain oral proficiency above the *Intermediate* level; but without following the full sequence, attaining a higher level of proficiency would be impossible (Rifkin, 2005).

Challenges

These are some of the many challenges that remain:

- Early language programs are not widely available, and study abroad is financially difficult for many students.
- Many language instructors lack adequate training in language teaching and do not possess a high level of proficiency in the language they are teaching.
- 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. The cost of technology is also an obstacle.
- Adequate resources for full course sequences are still unavailable in many languages.
- Few assessments are available to test high levels of language proficiency in many languages in all skill areas.

- There are few incentives for students to study LCTLs or for institutions to offer LCTLs.

Recommendations

The need to increase the number of students who reach high levels of proficiency exists for all languages but especially for the LCTLs. The following recommendations are offered as a starting point.

- Provide incentives to K-12 school districts to develop well-articulated, sustained language learning sequences beginning in the early grades.
- Make study abroad programs available and affordable for students studying LCTLs.
- Support the development and implementation of programs that promote teacher quality in foreign language teaching at all levels and across all languages.
- Implement programs that incorporate overseas experiences and other effective approaches to developing high levels of language proficiency.
- Allocate adequate resources for technology that can improve the quality of language learning.
- Develop resources for full course sequences in all languages.
- Develop and make available tests that measure high levels of language proficiency in all skill areas.
- Provide incentives for students to attain high levels of proficiency.
- Provide financial support and other vital resources to institutions that offer LCTLs.
- Support heritage language maintenance and development.
- Research "what works" in language teaching and learning.

Conclusion

The need for speakers who are proficient in more than one language is clear in the context of national interests and security, as well as for personal and societal benefits. The cost of ignoring this need has already been felt. The situation will become even more urgent if sufficient effort 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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