Part I

Principles, practices, and theory

1 Principles and practices in teaching Superior-level language skills: Not just more of the same

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Historically, few students achieve Superior and Distinguished levels of proficiency in any foreign language. In fact, relatively few courses even propose to bring students to the Superior level, at which students can expect to use the language professionally while having obviously less than native control of linguistic and cultural elements, let alone the Distinguished level, at which students begin to approach the level of an educated native speaker. (These levels are called Level 3 and Level 4, respectively, on the 5-level US government scale, which is presented later in this chapter.) For many years, there has been a tacit assumption among foreign language educators and administrators that language programs cannot be expected to bring students any further in the classroom than the Advanced High level. Consequently, few teachers have much experience in teaching students at the Superior level, yet there is a growing awareness of the need to do so. This book focuses on just that part of the language-teaching spectrum: successfully assisting Superior-level students to reach the Distinguished level. Its goal is to provide theory and successful models for teachers who find themselves faced with this task.

The direction from which we have come

In analyzing how best to teach students at the Superior level, it may be helpful to look at teaching practices in general. Specifically, what are the underlying philosophies of today's foreign language education (FLED), what are the theories of second language acquisition (SLA), what has research shown us about language learning, and what are the methods that guide our instruction – and how do these assumptions, ideas, knowledge, and practices influence the teaching of students at Superior levels of proficiency?

A paradigmatic overview

Since the early 1960s, foreign language educators have experienced a paradigm shift not only in their specialty fields but also across all sociological phenomena.

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Given a world that has become interdependent, the replacement of an industrial society with a technological and service industry in most developed countries, and a change in educational philosophy (not once but twice), it is no surprise that foreign language teachers would be hard-pressed to keep up with the changing – and escalating – demands to produce increasingly more proficient graduates in a world where language skills now play more of a pragmatic than an academic role and where language teaching practices, as a whole, have changed substantively in keeping with the so-called "New Paradigm."

We did not reach this state overnight. Rather, a number of steps led to our current beliefs, knowledge, and methods in foreign language education. Each of these steps holds important implications for teaching Superior-level students. They include a changing educational philosophy in keeping with social changes, a natural evolution in teaching methods as a result of new linguistic research, a growing understanding of the psychology of learning, and the appearance of a new paradigm.

Educational philosophy

Educational philosophy is shaped less by research in learning and teaching and more by the sociological and political needs of a given society. In the USA, we have seen at least three educational philosophies: transmission (passing the canon from one generation to the next), transaction (developing problem-solving skills), and transformation (personal growth) (J. P. Miller and Seller [1985]). While there has been a historical, i.e., chronological, order to the appearance of these philosophies, all do simultaneously exist today. Table 1.1 compares the "pure" forms of each of these philosophies as typically reflected in language classrooms.

At lower levels of proficiency, contemporary foreign language programs in the USA tend to reflect principles and practices associated with the transaction philosophy. This philosophy is seen most frequently in industrial and tech-nological societies (although, interestingly, many foreign language and other educational programs in European countries remain in the transmission mode). In transaction classrooms, students learn how to solve problems, innovate, im-plement ideas, and make things work: in short, to "do," as opposed to "know." The knowledge of facts loses importance, the assumption being that if students know how to use resources, they will be able to locate any facts needed. In prac-tice, classwork tends to be pragmatic. In foreign language classrooms, that has meant task-based, content-based, problem-based, and project-based learning, as well as the use of activities, such as role plays, and an emphasis on notions and functions. The nature of a transaction philosophy causes educators to focus on assessing the student program and program success based on outcomes of the classroom. In foreign language classrooms, assessments have most frequently taken the form of proficiency, prochievement (proficiency tests that use only

Table 1.1

Philosophy	Transmission	Transaction	Transformation
Goal	To "know" (knowledge)	To "do" (skill)	To "create" (ability)
Theory	Mastery Learning (Bloom, 1968)	Experiential Learning (Dewey, 1938)	Humanistic Learning (Rogers, 1968)
Class work	Exercises, use of teacher-made materials	Tasks, projects, role playing, use of authentic materials	Self-directed study, student-selected materials
Home assignments	Written exercises	Projects, tasks	Research
Role of teacher	Knower	Facilitator	Advisor
Grouping	Whole class	Small groups	Independent work
Type of tests	Achievement tests	Proficiency tests	Self-assessments
Syllabus design	Form-based, theme-based	Notional–functional, task-based, content-based	Learner-centered

materials and topics that students have worked with in the classroom), or performance tests. The development of national standards (ACTFL [1999]) is yet another example of transaction. These standards, in principle, do not focus on a corpus of knowledge but on a range of skills although knowledge may be required in order to demonstrate skill.

At the Superior level of instruction, the philosophical framework tends to be quite different. Most effective Superior-level programs, to wit those described in this volume, combine elements of all three philosophies, from teacher-controlled development of automaticity to fully independent learning. The knowledge, skills, and abilities needed at the Distinguished level may be the catalyst for the unification of seemingly incompatible philosophies and for the reemergence of a focus on conscious knowledge – at this level not that of the canon but a much deeper and broader cross-cultural understanding, greater linguistic and metalinguistic sophistication, and omnipresent metacognition as the predominant learning strategy.

Linguistics and methods

Since the early 1960s, methods that treated foreign language as a mechanism for converting information encoded in one linguistic system into the forms of another linguistic system have been ever better informed by theory and research in both general learning and SLA. In very recent years, SLA has become a discipline unto itself, and non-applied linguistic theory and research has had

a decreasing influence on English as a Second Language (ESL) and Foreign Language (L2) teaching methods.[1]

That does not mean, however, that FLED practices have become any less focused on learning needs at lower levels of proficiency, rather than considering an ultimate goal of near-native proficiency from the very beginning (see Byrnes, Chapter 2, for a more detailed discussion). As a result, few methods contain essential elements for teaching very advanced students, and many practices set the student up for increasingly retarded progress as s/he climbs the proficiency ladder. Table 1.2 depicts the evolution of methods in the USA; it describes representative methods and identifies, where applicable, the deterrents to developing near-native levels of proficiency (Level 4 [of five levels] on the US government scale) in the practices of each method.

As can be seen, no method to date has proved to be a perfect vessel for carrying students to Level-4 proficiency. It is not surprising, then, that each of the authors in Part II of this volume describes programs that are highly eclectic in nature. Course content and teaching practice are determined not by textbook design or teaching method, but by the specific needs of students. Further, since some teaching practices seem to set students up to fossilize at Levels 2 (Higgs and Clifford [1982]) and 3 (Soudakoff [2001]), and not only in grammatical accuracy but also in emerging sociolinguistic and sociocultural (and other) competences that never finish developing, a number of the chapter authors have instituted teaching practices in their programs aimed at remediation of problems caused by one or another teaching method, e.g., ingrained error and unsophisticated strategy use (especially the overuse of compensation strategies) associated with communicative methods and inexperience with authentic culture and materials typical of cognitive code methods.

Psychological research

As psychologists have learned more about the functioning of the human brain, foreign language educators have been given more sophisticated tools for determining appropriate methods for classroom instruction. Unfortunately, language educators have been slow to incorporate these discoveries into classrooms for two reasons: (1) the discoveries have not been framed in ways that relate directly to language teaching, and (2) they often question long-practiced beliefs. We present a few current neuropsychological findings here as examples. However, there are many more findings in the literature of neuroscience that have direct application to teaching any level of proficiency, including the Superior level, and these, too, warrant consideration by classroom teachers.

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[1] Here we are talking about the relationship between theory and practice in the USA and not necessarily that found elsewhere. For example, in some European countries and in Eurasia in general, theory and practice are often distinct fields, whereas the trend in the USA has generally been to apply theory (linguistic or, especially, SLA) to the classroom.

Table 1.2

Kind of method	Description	Typical results	Activities	Deterrents to Level 4
Grammar–translation	Learning of grammar rules; practices L2 and checks comprehension of L2 through L1	Ability to read in L2 and render content in L1	Translation; written grammar and vocabulary exercises; decontextualized vocabulary learning	Lack of cultural context; emphasis on written skills over oral ones; emphasis on language usage over language use
Structural approaches	Stimulus–response approach to learning (e.g., Audio-Lingual Method, Direct Method)	Automatization of responses in known and rehearsed situations	Repetition drills; substitution drills for grammar and vocabulary; dialogue memorization	Underdeveloped ability to handle authentic and unexpected situations and materials
Cognitive code	Based on the understanding of language as a system of rules through deductive approaches to learning (e.g., Silent Way, MMC)	Understand and see linguistic systems (accuracy)	Grammar exercises; Q&A exercises with teacher-made reading/listening materials; communication via manipulation of forms	Slow development of oral skills; inexperience with authentic culture and its artifacts
Communicative approaches	Loose collection of methods (e.g., TPR, Natural Approach) oriented toward interpersonal communication	Ability to negotiate meaning (fluency)	Role plays; tasks; projects; cooperative learning activities; reading/hearing authentic texts	Overemphasis on strategic competence; underdeveloped precision and formal language proficiency

The first reference is to the work of Ojemann, a neurosurgeon whose experimentation with epileptics uncovered the fact that first and second (and foreign) language centers are not co-located and that cell distribution and density is dissimilar (Calvin and Ojemann [1994]). These discoveries would seem to have direct implications for two groups of language teachers: (1) those working with beginners using methods based on information from first-language acquisition (e.g., the Natural Approach) and (2) those working with Superior-level students who need to reach near-native proficiency. The former group might consider the significance of differing L1–L2 brain structures for assessing the validity of L2 teaching practices that emulate L1 language acquisition. The latter group

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might look at brain structure information obtained on coordinate and compound bilinguals to inform some of their own teaching practices. While there is not yet enough information to dictate teaching techniques, there is enough information to guide (or, rather, redirect) foreign language education theory.

We would also reference the work in memory research (Reiser [1991]) that has questioned long-held but erroneous beliefs and promulgated new models for the conceptualization of memory functioning.[2] Where we once thought that information was stored as wholes, then recalled, we now know several important things about memory that have direct application to learning foreign languages. Some of the most important are summarized below.

1. Information must pass through sentient memory. For language students, this usually means that unless they pay attention to *and* understand what it is they are seeing or hearing, input does not turn into intake.

2. Information is stored componentially in diverse locations (form, function, pronunciation, and context are not one category once language enters storage; even if vocabulary is lexicalized within a specific content or context). With syntax, morphology, and lexicon separated neural components, students may be able to negotiate meaning with gross grammatical error (Allott [1989]).

3. Stored information can be overwritten. For lawyers, this translates into unreliability of eyewitness accounts (Luus and Wells [1991]). In the language classroom, this can translate into a special form of "forgetfulness": at lower levels, when students learn the past tense forms, present tense forms can sometimes become inaccessible; at higher levels, formal language, instead of becoming synonymous with other registers (and available as alternative expressions), can, upon occasion, replace those other registers, especially while the individual student's interlanguage is struggling with forms in free variation during development periods.

4. Reconstruction, rather than recall, is the process used by the working, or activated, memory. Therefore, teachers can expect students to make mistakes, which no amount of overt correction will prevent. (We are not talking here about errors – instances where students do not know the correct forms – which can be corrected through overt instruction and practice, i.e. developing greater automaticity [see discussion below of acquisition of linguistic competence at the SD level]. Rather, we are talking about miscues and slips of the tongue that occur in native language speech as well as foreign language speech. Sometimes a piece of information – an individual morpheme or lexeme, for example – can become temporarily irretrievable and result in grammatically or lexically flawed speech, including sometimes lower levels of speech than one normally expects from students at the SD level.

[2] We refer readers who desire more details about contemporary memory research as applied to language learning and teaching to work by Stevick (1996).

5. Many noncognitive factors affect memory. These include diet, exercise, and biorhythm, among others.

We would be remiss not to mention the traditional dichotomies of memory types: procedural memory (based on repetition of physical actions, such as those needed to drive a car) versus declarative memory (based on the knowledge of facts), as well as the difference between episodic memory (based on the perception, understanding, storage, and reconstruction of specific events, as well as words and facts directly or coincidentally associated with those events) and semantic memory (based on the encoding of thoughts and concepts into words used in rules-based phraseology, the decoding of words used in rules-based phraseology into thoughts and concepts, and the reconstruction of phraseology). Much of the current debate over direct instruction (DeKeyser [1998]) centers around the promotion of the requirement of one kind of memory over another for language acquisition. Traditional teaching methods depend on declarative memory, Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) on procedural memory, and many contemporary methods on episodic or semantic memory or some combination of the two. In reality, direct instruction does have a place, as does incidental learning. "Teaching in front" can be as important as "leading from behind." Level 4 users report the importance of all these experiences and approaches in attaining Distinguished-level proficiency (Leaver and Atwell [this volume]). Methodological demagoguery of any type rarely works, and, more often than not, the kind of eclecticism needed is highly variable, depending on individual students or groups of students.

Concepts of communicative competence

In using the term, *communicative competence*, we refer to the concept proposed by Hymes (1971) and defined within a language-learning framework by Spolsky (1978). That concept is generally realized in the classroom as "the ability to communicate with native speakers in real-life situations – authentic interpersonal communication that cannot be separated from the cultural, paralinguistic, and nonverbal aspects of language" (Stryker and Leaver [1997a, p. 12]).

As the concept of communicative competence settled deeper into the collective consciousness of the FLED community, analyses of the components of communicative competence suggested that it was not a unified whole but a composite of subcompetences. Canale and Swain (1980) identified four such components: grammatical (or linguistic) competence (ability to comprehend and manipulate the lexical and grammatical structures of a language), discourse competence (the ability to understand and apply culturally appropriate text structure), sociolinguistic competence (ability to understand and use the social rules of linguistic interaction for a given society), and strategic competence (the ability to apply appropriate learning strategies for acquisition of new languages and for coping with unknown language).

Although the segmentation of the concept of communicative competence into components has limitations (Byrnes [chapter 2, this volume]), it does provide a framework in which to shed light on the varying needs of students, as they progress from Novice to Distinguished levels of proficiency. While all students at all levels of proficiency need to develop all components of communicative competence, students at lower levels (Novice through Advanced High) appear to need the compensation aspects of strategic competence most of all, especially if they are enrolled in programs that introduce authentic materials at early stages of instruction (Stryker and Leaver [1997b]). Superior-level students, however, usually possess a fair amount of strategic competence (which they need to change from mostly compensatory to mostly metacognitive) and, to a lesser extent, sociolinguistic competence, which they must continue to develop. What they may need is more attention to linguistic and discourse competence (Ingold [this volume]; Dabars and Kagan [this volume]), especially to formal language (Leaver and Atwell [this volume]), and to something beyond the Canale–Swain construct.

That "something" may be the social and sociocultural components suggested by Mitrofanova (1996) and colleagues. Social competence is described as the readiness to engage in conversation (and we would add that for Level 4 speakers, this usually means the ability to use the language comfortably under conditions of stress, illness, or fatigue) and sociocultural competence as the integration of cultural elements into language use.[3]

Another added component may also be emotional competence (Eshkembeeva [1997]). An important factor in communicating competently is being able to express one's personality in the foreign language so as to project one's true essence (characteristic of Distinguished levels of proficiency) and not one's adopted essence that results from cultural mimicry (typical of Advanced and Superior levels) nor an absence of unique personality that results from lack of linguistic skill (observed at Novice and Intermediate levels).

While all students need most of the components of communicative competence at any given time, there is a changing balance that occurs with proficiency gain. Figure 1.1 shows what we see as the relative balance of componential saliency along the continuum from Levels 0 to 4.

The Proficiency Movement

The push for proficiency – its definition and measurement – originally came from US government agencies, first and foremost among them the Foreign

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[3] While some might argue that readiness to engage in conversation implies a personality characteristic (extroversion), not a language competence, and can at least make a *prima facie* case for their assertions, there is nevertheless some merit to considering the existence of social competence as a possible component of communicative competence. In fact there is more than some merit to this because many introverts develop social competence in the interests of other goals, such as language learning (Madeline Ehrman, personal communication, September 9, 2001).
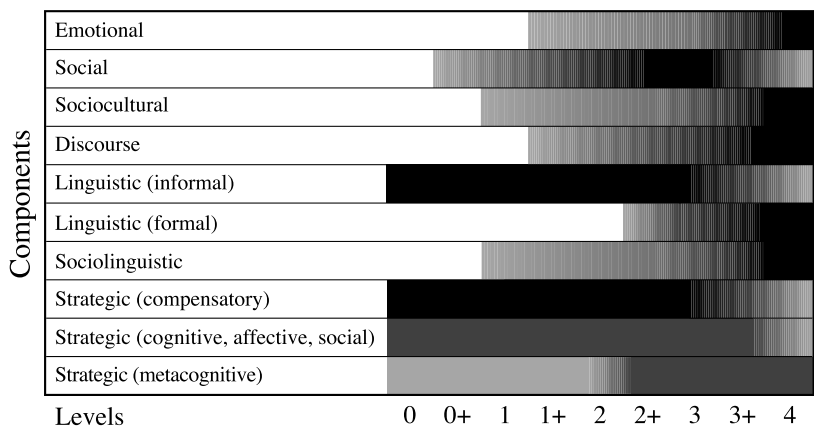
Darker shade indicates greater importance at a given proficiency level.

—*Chart contributed by Renée Meyer*

Figure 1.1 Need for an engagement of communicative competence components along the L2 learning continuum

Service Institute (FSI), the training arm of the US Department of State. The original intent in proposing language proficiency levels was to provide a means to identify, assess, and label foreign language skills with the goal of matching job requirements and employee capability. For the purpose of identifying and assigning labels for levels, an oral test, the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), based on skill descriptions, was designed (Frith [1980]). Thus, the Proficiency Movement by design was informed by testing approaches, which in turn and secondarily influenced teaching practices.[4] Table 1.3 summarizes the ILR levels under discussion in this volume – Advanced High, or Level 2+, through Distinguished, or Level 4. The ILR scale was developed as a way to quantify measures of quality. This becomes clear as one progresses through the various proficiency levels. It is not a matter of simply increasing the number of structures and vocabulary controlled – although that is part of proficiency – but of the way in which language is processed.

The Proficiency Movement formally began within academia at a meeting with James Frith (then Dean at the Foreign Service Institute), James Alatis

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[4] An unfortunate outgrowth of this phenomenon has been the attempt by some teachers to "teach the test." In some cases, this means practicing the test format and the kinds of test items in multiple attempts to raise student scores. In other cases, this means designing a syllabus whose content is determined by test content. While on the surface, preparing students for a test may appear innocuous and one could even argue that a test that is truly a "proficiency" test cannot be "studied" or prepared for, the reality is that familiarity with test format, principles, and content can, indeed, put "prepared" students in a position to receive a higher score than equally proficient students who have not been prepared. The question of the tail (test) wagging the dog (teaching practices and syllabus design) has periodically been a hotly debated issue since the development of Oral Proficiency Interviews and other proficiency tests.