

Developing Professional-Level Language Proficiency

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

Betty Lou Leaver and Boris Shekhtman

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.

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 technological 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, implement 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 practice, 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.

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

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 (Eshkembeeveva [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

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).

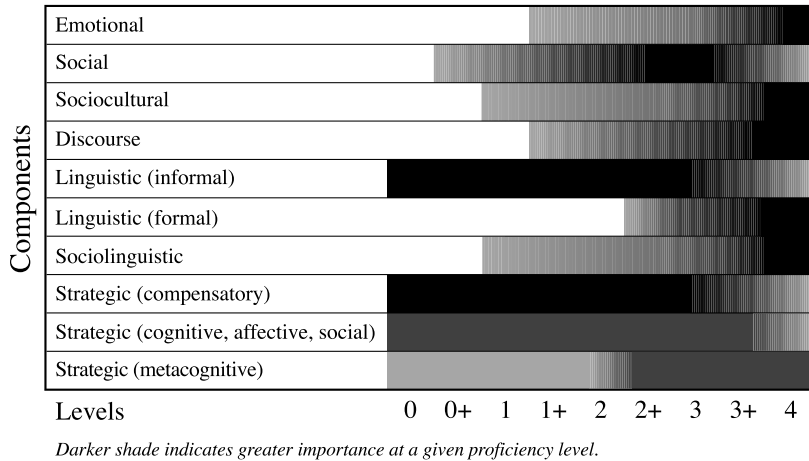


Figure 1.1 Need for an engagement of communicative competence components along the L2 learning continuum

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

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.

Table 1.3

Level	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
2+	Understands social and work demands and concrete topics related to interests	Satisfies work requirements with usually acceptable and effective language	Reads factual, non-technical language, grasping main and subsidiary ideas	Writes with some precision and in some detail about most common topics
3	Understands all the essentials of standard speech, including technical aspects of professional field	Speaks with enough precision to participate in practical, social, and professional conversations	Reads a variety of authentic prose on unfamiliar subjects with near-complete comprehension	Prepares effective formal and informal written exchanges on practical, social, and professional topics
3+	Comprehends forms and styles of speech pertinent to professional needs	Accomplishes a wide range of sophisticated and demanding professional tasks	Comprehends a variety of styles and forms pertinent to professional needs	Writes in a few prose styles pertinent to professional and education needs
4	Understands all forms and styles of speech pertinent to professional needs	Speaks fluently and accurately on all levels pertinent to professional needs	Reads fluently and accurately all forms of language pertinent to professional needs	Writes professionally and accurately in a variety of prose styles

(Georgetown University), and heads of the American Associations of Teachers of various foreign languages and the American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages (ACTFL) in 1980, at which ACTFL agreed to accept responsibility for the OPI workshops for teachers that FSI had been conducting (Hancock and Scebold [2000]). ACTFL subsequently developed standards for academia accounting for the less intensive nature of most academic programs and the ensuing need for more categories at the lower levels of proficiency and fewer at the higher levels. Table 1.4 illustrates the relationship between the two scales and reflects the newly issued ACTFL guidelines (Breiner-Sanders *et al.* [2000]). The changes from the provisional guidelines issued in 1986 were the reconstitution of the two Advanced levels (Advanced and Advanced Plus) into three levels and the dropping of the proposed (but nearly never used) Distinguished level. For the purposes of this book, we have retained the earlier nomenclature in order to distinguish between students at Level 3 (which we refer to as Superior level) and those at Level 4 (which we refer to as Distinguished level).

Over time, the Proficiency Movement and the subsequent development of communicative approaches to teaching have focused on improving students'

Table 1.4

Level	ILR	ACTFL
5	Functionally Native Proficiency	Superior (formerly Distinguished)
4+	Advanced Professional Proficiency, Plus	
4	Advanced Professional Proficiency	
3+	General Professional Proficiency, Plus	Superior
3	General Professional Proficiency	
2+	Limited Working Proficiency, Plus	Advanced High
2	Limited Working Proficiency	Advanced Mid
		Advanced Low
1+	Elementary Proficiency, Plus	Intermediate High
1	Elementary Proficiency	Intermediate Mid
		Intermediate Low
0+	Memorized Proficiency	Novice High
0	No Proficiency	Novice Mid
		Novice Low

ability to use the foreign language rather than to know information about the foreign language. In most institutions that have moved from structural teaching approaches to communicative teaching approaches, student achievement has significantly improved (Corin [1997]; Klee and Tedick [1997]; Leaver [1997]; Stryker [1997]), as measured by performance on an Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) or similar instrument.

Ironically, however, the very movement that introduced concepts of using language to achieve communicative goals spawned teaching practices that may be ineffective at higher levels while highly effective at lower levels. The authors

of several chapters in this volume discuss this rather unexpected phenomenon and the reasons for it. We suggest that perhaps different attributes are needed for success at early levels of language study and success at much higher levels, a hypothesis embraced by most of the chapter authors, all of whom have worked with students at beginning, as well as near-native levels of proficiency.

Contemporary FLED

Given proficiency-oriented goals and a focus on the development of communicative competence, most FLED programs share a number of characteristics that differentiate today's cutting-edge programs from those of yesteryear. These characteristics include authenticity in task and language, a role for content, attention to learner differences, incorporation of elements of schema theory, use of higher-order thinking skills, and application of adult learning theory.

Authenticity. In ever larger numbers, language programs and teachers are turning to authentic materials (prepared by native speakers for native speakers) for use in the classroom at increasingly lower levels of proficiency. Some task-based programs have even used almost solely authentic texts from the very first day of language instruction (Maly [1993]). In Superior-level programs, authentic materials are essential and even unavoidable and are used in a number of ways: (1) text, discourse, and linguistic analysis; (2) source of expressions for acquisition; and (3) information. Truly authentic tasks (e.g., for journalism students, interviewing two statesmen on a controversial topic and preparing a balanced article for publication), as opposed to pedagogical tasks that make use of authentic materials but do not necessarily reflect real-life use of language (e.g., comparing articles in which the opinions of the two statesmen above have been reported), become more realizable at the Superior level. Nearly all the authors in this volume describe programs that require students to perform tasks while in training that closely resemble tasks they are undertaking or will undertake on the job. Some are advocates of a task-based approach to teaching; others simply find that language and job performance are often intertwined at the Superior level.

Content. Chaput (2000) points out that foreign language studies are the only university-level subjects that do not focus on specific content. At least, that was the case before the introduction of Languages Across the Curriculum (LAC) programs and other content-mediated communicative approaches. At lower proficiency levels, students benefit when new vocabulary and grammar is embedded in real content and real contexts. For students at the Superior level, language and content are inextricably intertwined by necessity.

The kinds of content in foreign language study vary tremendously at the Superior level. In all cases, a knowledge of literature and culture is unavoidable; even military institutions include reading and discussion of literature and

learning about culture in their Superior-level programs. The Caspian Naval Academy's Russian program is an example. In this program, Red Army officers from Azerbaijan learned Russian through the study of classical literature with military themes, in addition to the use of actual military communications (Aliev and Leaver [1994]). Most Superior-Distinguished (SD) programs include content that is directly related to students' job needs, and that content can be scientific, humanistic, journalistic, diplomatic, or military, among many other options that are restricted only by the number of professions in which there is an opportunity for international employment – nearly any industry today.

Learner-centered instruction. In recent years, more teachers are beginning to understand and accept the importance of learner variables in the language acquisition process (Brown [1994]; Ehrman [1996]; Leaver [1998]; Nunan [1988]; Oxford [1990]), although program sensitivity to learner differences is not part of the New Paradigm *per se*. Learner-centered instruction refers to more than just understanding learning styles and developing students' repertoire of learning strategies. It also refers to accommodating students' needs and empowering students to be participants in the learning process. All of the programs described in this volume are learner-centered.

Today's study of motivation began with the suggestion that students can be motivated either integratively (desire to be part of the culture) or instrumentally (need for the language for professional purposes) (Gardner and Lambert [1972]). Although there appears to be a firmly held belief among many foreign language teachers that integrative motivation produces higher levels of proficiency, early empirical evidence suggests a more complex situation; in fact, instrumental motivation may be more frequently associated with the successful high-level acquisition of some languages (e.g., Americans learning Russian) and integrative with others (Europeans learning English) (Leaver and Atwell [this volume]). Other, more complex models, have been subsequently suggested, along the lines of various types of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, that better delineate individual differences (for a discussion, see Ehrman, this volume); even so, no one form of motivation over another has been empirically shown to be a determinant for reaching Level 4.

Motivation, it now appears, is but one of many individual variables that influence the success of language learning. Anxious students can filter their language learning experience through such thick shielding that often immense amounts of comprehensible input result in limited intake (Horwitz [1988]). Risk-takers in terms of language learning progress more quickly and experience greater enjoyment than do their non-risk-taking peers (Beebe [1988]; Pellegrino [1999]). Within classrooms, many interpersonal and small-group issues can enhance or impair the efforts of any individual student in the "visible classroom" (the overt relationships) who reacts poorly to the "invisible classroom" (ubiquitous

but covert group dynamics), to use the concept and terminology advanced by Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998), i.e., the significance of small-group dynamics and rapport may be greater than many teachers realize.

Again, the vast majority of research on these variables has been conducted on groups of students with mixed backgrounds and at lower levels of proficiency. In our seventeen-year experience in extensive and intensive work with Superior-level students, learners at this level, especially those studying in courses and groups, tend to have a different set of anxieties, most of which are more closely tied to linguistic aspects of job performance than to the intellectual risk-taking required of language learning in general. Some groups, such as teachers, however, may have group-specific affective impediments, as Dabars and Kagan (this volume) point out.

Schema. Schema theory has for some time informed communicative teaching practices. Although schema theory is often attributed to the New Paradigm, the first mention of schema is by Sir Francis Head (1920). By schema, Head refers to the background knowledge and sets of concepts that learners already possess. New information is understood via the concepts already acquired – or not understood due to lack of sufficient schema.

For foreign language students, content schemata, cultural schemata, and linguistic schemata are all essential for accurate communication. Research suggests that in many, if not most, cases, especially at lower levels of proficiency, lack of linguistic schemata is generally less an impediment than lack of content schemata in comprehension in both L1 and L2 (R. Gläser as cited in Hirsch [1987]). In fact, knowledge of content can help students fill in the linguistic gaps.

In the case of Superior-level students, both cultural and linguistic schemata are more extensive and more sophisticated than one finds in a beginning learner. For that reason, new content can be learned via already-possession linguistic and cultural schemata, making many more authentic materials and situations accessible to Superior-level students. At this level, given the nature of tasks typically assigned and the precision with which they need to be completed, linguistic schemata tend to play a far more significant role than at lower levels of proficiency. Equally important is attention to sociocultural, sociolinguistic, and discourse schemata, as most of the authors in this volume point out.

Higher-order thinking. Bloom (1956) posited a hierarchy of thinking skills that he called a “Taxonomy of Educational Objectives.” In this system, higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation create more powerful learning circumstances than do the lower-order thinking skills (LOTS), such as memorization, comprehension, and application. Although most language teachers nowadays, especially those who use task-based instruction

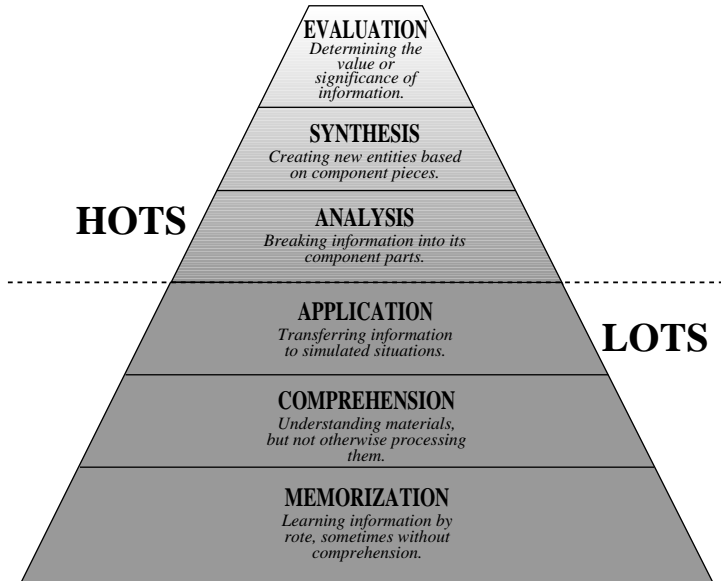


Figure 1.2

as a method, incorporate higher-order thinking skills as a matter of course, we reproduce Bloom's hierarchy in Figure 1.2 for those who may not know it.

While higher-order thinking is the preference of many teachers at any level of proficiency, at the Superior level higher-order thinking is essential to students' learning – and, in our experience, is often demanded by students. By way of example, we cite the numerous programs presented in this volume, most of which incorporate higher-order thinking skills in the tasks and activities used in instruction.

Adult learning. In this volume, we speak exclusively about the adult learner. There is a clear reason for this: on the proficiency scales used, Level 4 / Distinguished proficiency clearly requires the linguistic maturity exhibited principally in the L2 adult population. In fact, a child, who has not achieved Piaget's formal operations (Piaget [1967]) and the requisite knowledge and experience, would not be able to speak at the equivalent of the Level 4 and beyond in his or her native language. To date, no study or test, to our knowledge, has shown a child at Level 4.

In working with adults, many foreign language educators recommend the application of students' knowledge and the personalization of questions and other tasks, in order to take into account adults' schemata, which are highly complex and sophisticated. Knowles (1990) suggests that adult students, unlike children, need to have control over their learning – much in the way that some foreign

language educators over the past several years have advocated developing life-long language-learning skills in students (Brecht and Walton [1994]), designing learner-centered classrooms (Nunan [1988]), and empowering students to be in better control of their own cognitive processes and classroom behaviors (Oxford and Leaver [1996]). Learner-centeredness and personalization look very different at Superior levels than they do at lower levels of proficiency. Where lower levels might introduce open discussion, at Superior levels discourse assumes quite different traits, as described in various chapters in this volume. Teacher–student interactions change from master–apprentice to near-peers with the same mission (see, for example, Ehrman’s discussion of Curran’s theories on this topic in Chapter 12).

Interestingly, the myth that adult learners are less efficient language learners than children is being systematically debunked (Schleppegrell [1987]). Children who learn their first language to educated native levels can take up to eighteen years to do so. Further, children learning a second language in-country get far more hours on task with the second language than do adult learners, who, for the most part, are occupied with jobs and families where they use L1. A child’s greater accuracy in phonetics due to lack of brain lateralization aside, the adult, with his or her greater number of schemata and limited time on task, may actually be the more efficient language learner. Regardless of which side of this argument a teacher supports, few would deny that adults need an approach to language instruction that differs from children’s needs.

One of the major distinctions between children and adults – ultimately an impediment to adult acquisition of near-native skills in L2 – is the far greater number of L1 schemata possessed by adults. The result is the tendency of adults to subordinate L2 information to L1 schemata, following Piagetian theory that new information is acquired by linking it to already-known information (Piaget and Inhelder [1973]), a trait that allows for more rapid acquisition of the second language, yet at the same time creating an interlanguage that is neither L1 nor L2 but a learner’s approximation of L2, usually based on L1 with varying amounts of L1 interference.⁵ The obvious conclusion is that comprehensible input may not always be enough for adults since input, even when understood, can be interpreted in accordance with an interlanguage rather than the second language. The task of the Superior-level student is to replace a faulty interlanguage with an idiolect that subordinates itself only to the rules of L2.

A programmatic overview

Superior-level learning takes place in a variety of venues. A number of unique programs have been successful at developing Distinguished levels of proficiency.

⁵ In cases where students are studying L3 and L4, interlanguage may also be based on other foreign languages, as well as the student’s native language.

In this volume, we present programs conducted in generic foreign language classrooms and in-country settings. Both venues share many characteristics, and all programs depend on extensive in-country experience (or its equivalent, such as extensive interaction with the émigré community) and classroom learning. Most teachers of Superior-level students find that these students have usually already been in a country where their language of study is spoken (Leaver and Bilstein [2000]). In fact, for acquisition of some components of communicative competence, in-country experience or its equivalent appears to be necessary (James Bernhardt, personal communication, March 27, 1999).

Although the authors of the chapters in this volume have diverse opinions about the role of grammar in Novice through Advanced levels of instruction and how error correction should be handled at those levels, they are uniform in considering the development of accuracy and sophistication in grammatical expression to be essential in reaching Distinguished levels of proficiency. At Superior levels, the issue of explicit instruction versus implicit acquisition (VanPatten [1998]) is no longer the burning question that it has been at Novice and Intermediate (and even Advanced) levels. It is at the higher levels of L1 proficiency that elementary and secondary schools explicitly teach students the formal elements of language in keeping with the spoken and written norms of that society. Often, teaching Superior-level students boils down to identifying acquired inaccuracies and retraining for accuracy, along with the acquisition of formal registers (Kubler, Shekhtman *et al.*, and Caudery [all this volume]). Explicit instruction, in the experience of all the chapter authors, has been required to reach the Distinguished level efficiently, and each of the authors provides a rationale for explicit instruction at very high levels of proficiency (including authors who do not use much explicit instruction at lower levels of proficiency).

Classroom-based language instruction

Although some may insist that Superior and Distinguished levels of language proficiency cannot be achieved in the classroom, many Level-4 users who did not have instruction at the Superior level feel that such instruction would have been useful (Leaver and Atwell, this volume). The students in the programs described in this book, as well as other programs, have been able to reach these levels in the classroom; included in this volume are details of an immersion institute for German Teaching Assistants at Georgetown University (Byrnes [Chapter 3]), a course for improving language skills of students enrolled in Translation and Interpretation programs in French and Spanish at the Monterey Institute of International Studies (Angelelli and Degueudre), Chinese programs in China for students from the United States (Kubler), Russian courses in the United States that utilize the émigré community (Shekhtman *et al.*), a thirty-year-old reading program for foreign students in Cairo, Egypt (Badawi), a model for teaching

writing (Caudery), programs for heritage speakers (Angelelli and Kagan), and a US-based program conducted eight times for teachers of Russian (Dabars and Kagan).

Technology-based instruction

Increasingly, the use of technology has provided a wide variety of opportunities for language teachers to adapt, augment, and supplement their classroom lessons. Homework assignments that require use of the Internet develop students' skills in navigating through authentic web sites in search of authentic materials for what is quite often an authentic search. The expanding plethora of technological support, however, like textbooks, nearly exclusively addresses students at lower levels of proficiency. While highly autonomous learners at the SD level can find many ways on their own to use the Internet to improve their linguistic skills, to our knowledge, no specific materials or programs have been developed with SD students in mind, with one exception: LangNet. The LangNet "Reading to the Four" Project is described by Ingold in Chapter 7 of this volume.

Toward an understanding of the Superior level for foreign language instruction

In teaching and supervising language programs at very advanced levels of instruction, we have noticed that a qualitative difference exists between teaching students at lower levels of proficiency and teaching Superior-level students. There is a clear difference also between the teaching and learning needs of any one student just starting out and that same student at the Superior level. At the lower levels, students need to acquire the basic linguistic system and some understanding of culture. At the higher levels, they need to acquire the uncommon, as well as the common, and the infrequent as well as the frequent, in linguistic, discourse, and sociolinguistic expression. Further, the emphasis on cultural appropriateness in the definition of higher proficiency levels presumes substantial interaction with native speakers, which is not a typical experience of basic and intermediate students. These needs and our experience lead us to suggest two characteristics that distinguish students at the Superior level of foreign language proficiency: linguistic experience and communicative focus.

Linguistic experience

Linguistic experience assumes that no student reaches the Superior-level classroom without prior language-learning experience and that this experience shapes that student's expectations for continued instruction. For that reason, Superior-level students typically have strong linguistic convictions. Their foreign language experience is rich and their range of strategies for classroom

learning broad. As a result, their evaluation of instructor performance is frequently critical. This attitude can either damage the rapport in the classroom (when students are unused to or disagree with the teaching method) or significantly enhance it (when students recognize an individual teacher's skill). Affectively, these students often bring great goal orientation and perceive everything outside their specific area of interest to be distractive. Cognitively, Superior-level students bring a wealth of schemata to the learning task, but the nature of those schemata differs among students. Given these characteristics of Superior-level students, most Superior-level courses with which we are familiar allow students choices in content and/or adapt instruction to the specific learning needs of the students in the classroom.

Communicative focus

The term, *Communicative Focus* (CF), is introduced here by the authors in an attempt to provide a means for identifying levels of communicative effectiveness of the language itself. CF refers to the relative proportion of idea and language mechanics in the process of communication. For example, the native speaker communicates without conscious focus on language (i.e., the idea, or *what* the person wants to say, is of utmost importance). The native speaker, then, has high CF. In contrast, beginning students typically talk with pauses and difficulties, search for words, and deliberately think about the grammar they use (at the extreme, the idea may become inexpressible due to the emphasis placed on mechanics or *how* the person wants or can say something). These students have very low CF. As students gain in proficiency, their CF increases, and the balance of attention changes from mechanics to ideas. This is not to say that the language user with high CF never selectively chooses words or expressions. However, he or she does so under the full influence of the ideational and sociolinguistic–sociocultural (situational appropriateness) plane. (See Leaver and Atwell, this volume, for a fuller discussion.) Nor is this to say that the lower-proficiency language learner is unconcerned with the expression of ideas. However, the cognitive resources required for intelligible communication may prevent the learner from being able to say exactly what he or she means.

The significance of CF for students

The basic-course student focuses on *how* to say what he or she wants to communicate. For him or her, *how* is usually more important than *what*; in other words, the mechanical plane of communication is more important than the ideational plane.⁶ Communication in such instances is viewed as a process of

⁶ In fact, some well-intentioned teachers of beginning students, anxious to develop their fluency, may tell them not to worry about accuracy of content, just to say what it is that they know how to say, bending the truth to do so. While this might, indeed, build some kinds of fluency (or practice certain forms), it can lead students away from developing high CF.

stringing together linguistic units in a fashion that meets certain prescriptions or applies a set of lexicalizations to a known situation. In either case, the CF of the basic-course student is of necessity relatively low.

The Superior-level student already knows how to say what he or she wants to communicate. At this level, *what* is more important than *how*. In other words, the ideational plane becomes more important to the learner than the mechanical plane, choices related to which having developed into habits. His or her CF is correspondingly high. The high-CF student who is operating at the Superior level (Level 3) in focusing on the “what” or the ideational plane of communication may still exhibit relatively low levels of sociolinguistic and sociocultural competence.

Distinguished-level students have an even stronger ideational focus. At the same time, they have nearly full access to the mechanical aspects of the language, choosing to pay attention to language mechanics when they want to sound erudite, need to make a point very precisely (as is the case of people who must negotiate intergovernmental agreements), are talking with someone with lesser language skills but for whom the target language serves as the *lingua franca*, are preparing an article for publication, are giving a lecture to a group of native speakers, or are serving as a high-level interpreter or translator, among many situations in which precision in word choice and structure is essential.

At the highest levels, students have at their fingertips multiple correct structures to express the same idea, as well as a sense of how to build their own unique structures in pertinent situations, and are searching for phraseology, as well as discourse type, that will best meet their communicative need on a sociolinguistic, sociocultural, and emotional basis appropriate to the cultural situation and goal of their communication – or, in the case of translators and interpreters, that will best express the message, intent, and personality of a speaker or the innuendoes of a document. Thus, the words and grammar have become important again, but in the same way that they are important to the well-educated native speaker: how best to express oneself in order to convince, persuade, convey information, or achieve any other particular communicative need. On the receptive level, words also become important again, but in the same sense that they are important to the native speaker: a new word is a “find,” intriguing, and, while not interfering with communication, attracts a moment of attention from the listener.

The influence of CF on instruction

An important part of developing communicative skills is providing students with more sophisticated and appropriate strategies than the ones they have used at lower levels. Such strategies are mostly metacognitive in nature, rather than purely cognitive or compensatory. Examples include planning and evaluation, as well as eliciting help in comprehending from a native speaker in natural and