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# A Ceiling Effect in Traditional Classroom Foreign Language Instruction: Data from Russian

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This article compares previous language gain studies in foreign languages with new data on language gain in the instructed second language acquisition of Russian. The acquisition of listening, reading, speaking, and writing proficiency shows a significant correlation not only with hours of classroom instruction in immersion and nonimmersion settings, but also with grammatical competence. The data suggest that there is a ceiling effect in traditional classroom foreign language instruction.

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RECENT EVENTS HAVE FOCUSED ATTENTION in the United States on learning outcomes in foreign language instruction as never before since the launching of Sputnik in 1957. Political leaders are questioning why federal agencies lack personnel with language expertise to meet intelligence and law enforcement needs, and substantial financial support has been dedicated to “flagship centers” with special curricula focusing on teaching students at the advanced and superior levels according to the *Proficiency Guidelines* (Interagency Language Roundtable [ILR] and American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages [ACTFL]). In this context, many foreign language professionals are revisiting language gain studies to reconsider the connections between curricula and learning outcomes.

Carroll’s (1967) study of the language proficiency of university seniors with foreign language majors is perhaps the most significant work in this area because it was the first major study of its kind and because Carroll tested 2,784 students in French, German, Italian, Russian, and Spanish in listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Form A of the *Modern Language Association [MLA] Foreign*

*Language Proficiency Tests for Teachers and Advanced Students*). Carroll reported that seniors were attaining advanced-high (ILR 2+) levels in speaking and listening and found this “disturbing”: “The most striking thing about these charts is the generally low median levels of attainment . . . they reveal” (pp. 140, 134).

If Carroll was disturbed by a mean learning outcome of advanced-high, one can only imagine how he would react to the results observed by Magnan (1986), Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsburg (1993), Tschirner (1996), Thompson (1996), and Davidson (1998, 2002, 2003), or the reported findings of the Defense Language Institute (Omaggio-Hadley, 2001) and the Foreign Service Institute (Jackson & Kaplan, 2001). Magnan found that the average oral proficiency level of university students in 4th-year French was advanced (not advanced-high, as Carroll had found). Magnan’s findings for the lower levels in French (intermediate-low and intermediate-mid for 1st- and 2nd-year French, respectively) were confirmed by Tschirner (1996) who studied oral proficiency levels of students of German in the first 4 semesters of a university German curriculum. Although Tschirner did not test students in 4th-year German, the fact that his study yielded results in 1st- and 2nd-year German similar to Magnan’s suggests that the German

curriculum may not have produced advanced-high or superior level speakers, either. Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsberg (1993) tested students immediately prior to and following study abroad programs in Russia to examine language gain during study abroad. They did not consider hours of prior instruction as a variable, but the students tested generally had 2 to 3 years of college Russian before going on their study abroad program. They found that slightly more than 57% of the students they tested had intermediate-mid oral proficiency, and just over 20% had intermediate-high oral proficiency prior to participation in the study abroad program in which they had enrolled. This finding suggests that nearly 78% of the students participating in this program were at the intermediate level in oral proficiency after 2 or 3 years of college-level instruction, again in line with Magnan's findings, but not with Carroll's. This same study (Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsberg, 1993) revealed that approximately 83% of all the students had intermediate-mid listening proficiency and 45% had intermediate-high reading proficiency. Thompson (1996), also working in Russian, reported that students completing 3rd- or 4th-year Russian in a summer intensive immersion program demonstrated advanced, not advanced-high, speaking, listening, and reading skills, and intermediate-high writing skills. It is not clear, however, that students in more traditional (nonimmersion) programs would have reached these same levels of skills.

In reviewing Carroll's findings from 1967 and considering the state of instruction in Russian, Robin (2000) suggested that learning outcomes have fallen. He maintained that the failure to improve learning outcomes since Carroll's study can be interpreted as a failure of the proficiency movement given that access to input (e.g., reading and listening through the Internet, speaking and writing with émigrés in the United States and on study abroad programs) improved significantly during the same period. Robin's argument is compelling if Carroll's data are accurate. However, it is possible that Carroll's data are not reliable indicators of the state of foreign language learning outcomes in 1967. Although Carroll had a very large number of cases, the correlation of Form A of the MLA test to today's proficiency ratings is questionable, especially in light of the fact that proficiency guidelines in the academic context were codified only in the early 1980s. Moreover, the interviewers conducting speaking assessments in Carroll's 1967 study were not trained and normed according to today's standards for oral proficiency interviewers. The question remains, then, as to what level

of skills learners can attain in 1, 2, 3, or 4 years of classroom foreign language instruction today.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND PROCEDURES

The central research questions for this project were as follows.

1. What is the correlation between hours of traditional (i.e., nonimmersion) classroom instruction and proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing?
2. Is there a significant difference in acquisition between traditional foreign language classroom instruction and immersion experiences?
3. Does a correlation exist between the acquisition of any of the four skills and acquisition of grammatical competence?

In order to answer these questions, the author of this study developed tests based on the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* for listening, reading, and writing, for students of Russian in traditional and immersive learning environments. The listening and reading tests were computer-mediated. The students listened to or read texts in Russian. They read questions about the texts in English and wrote their responses in English. They could read the questions before, during, and after listening to or reading the texts themselves. The questions were displayed on the same computer screen as the texts (reading) or the audio-buttons (listening). All the questions were short-answer (at the novice and intermediate levels) or essay questions (at the advanced and superior levels). The writing test featured prompts in English at all four major levels (novice, intermediate, advanced, and superior). The students were given 90 minutes to write in Russian without using a dictionary or any other references. The Middlebury Russian School teachers of Russian were trained in an in-service program to score the listening, reading, and writing tests. The grammar test in this study consisted of an extended cloze passage in Russian, from a Russian mystery novel or from memoirs, with 100 blanks for the missing words or phrases. The different versions of the test were controlled for content so that the students could be tested on the same kinds of items, with the same number of blanks for nouns in various cases, conjugated verb forms, prepositions, time expressions, relative pronouns, participles, and so forth. Two different kinds of oral exams were administered. A sampling of students at each level of instruction (the first or last four students at each level by alphabetical order of last name) participated in an oral proficiency interview conducted by

TABLE 1  
Participants by Year and Level of Study

Year	Level							Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
2001	18	10	28	n/a	30	n/a	24	110
2002	24	14	16	21	19	16	15	125
2003	16	13	17	20	18	19	14	117
Total	58	37	61	41	67	35	53	352

*Note.* Levels 4 and 6 were introduced only with the 2002 summer session.

ACTFL-certified Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) testers; these interviews were then blindly rated by a second certified tester in accordance with ACTFL testing protocols. In those instances in which OPI testers' ratings did not exactly coincide, interviews were rated by a third certified tester. Some of these interviews were conducted by telephone by certified testers who were not on the Middlebury Russian School faculty; others were conducted on site by faculty members who were certified OPI testers. The rest of the students were tested with an oral exam based on the oral proficiency interview. Sample questions from all five tests appear in Appendix A.

The participants in this study were students in the Middlebury Russian School, an intensive 9-week summer immersion program in Russian in Vermont. Data were collected over 3 years as shown in Table 1. The gender balance of the participants is described in Table 2.

The Middlebury Russian School, founded in 1945, is a well-known summer immersion program, the largest such program for Russian in the United States. It attracts learners from all over the United States and abroad, including traditional university-age students currently enrolled in degree programs at other institutions, nontraditional learners from all walks of life, and retirees. Some of the learners enrolled in this immersion program are sent there by their employers—including well-known newspapers, large banking firms, and various U.S. and international agencies, as well as government agencies from other countries—in order to improve Russian language

TABLE 2  
Gender Balance of Participants

Year	Female	Male	Total
2001	61	49	110
2002	65	60	125
2003	54	63	117
Total	180	172	352

skills immediately prior to a posting in Russia or a Russian-speaking country (such as Kazakhstan). Classes at the Middlebury Russian School are conducted 4 hours a day, 5 days a week, for 9 weeks (for the language program) entirely in Russian, of course, but the Russian does not stop at the end of the class session. All program participants are required to sign a language pledge requiring them to use Russian as their only language of communication for the duration of the 9-week program. The Russian School's residential life (dormitories and dining facilities) and co-curricular programs are offered exclusively in Russian: Students socialize with one another, with their instructors, with members of their instructors' families, and with visiting Russian scholars, artists, and performers exclusively in Russian. Students enrolling in the program must have completed high school but need not have completed a bachelor's degree. Many enrolled students were pursuing graduate degrees in the social sciences with a research interest in Russia. The program's inclusive fees (tuition, room and board, student fees) were approximately \$7,000, and many students were given need-based financial aid awards for some of the program's costs.

The overwhelming majority of participants were native speakers of English of university age, most of whom were enrolled in bachelor's degree programs at postsecondary institutions. Fewer than 5 participants in each cohort year were nonnative speakers of English; statistical analysis of the test results of native speakers of English and nonnative speakers of English showed no significant difference in performance between the two groups. The participants were approximately equally divided between females and males, with slightly more females than males in the cohorts for 2001 and 2002, but slightly more males than females in 2003. The participants fell into two groups: those with and those without prior instruction in Russian or experience living in a Russian-speaking country. Students without any prior exposure to Russian did not take any pre-immersion-program (henceforth, "preprogram") tests. Students with any prior exposure to Russian, however minimal, completed five preprogram tests (listening, reading, speaking, writing, and grammar). All students, regardless of prior exposure to Russian, completed post-immersion-program (henceforth, "postprogram") tests in the same skill areas. In addition, in the summers of 2002 and 2003, all students completed a survey in which they recorded the nature of their prior experience with Russian, noting how many hours of classroom study or

months residing in Russia they had had and, in the case of the classroom study of Russian, where they had studied the language. (Data concerning prior instruction were not collected in the summer of 2001.) The students participating in 2002–2003 had studied Russian at over 90 different institutions, private and public, in all geographic regions of the United States, as depicted in Appendix B.

The students were placed into appropriate levels for instruction in the 9-week program based on the following factors: (a) performance on the speaking test, (b) performance on the grammar test, (c) performance on the writing test, (d) previous instruction in Russian, and (e) other materials in their application.

Evidence from the listening and reading tests was not available at the time of the initial placement process, but, in some cases, did play a role later in the shift of a student from one level to another. In the summer of 2001, five levels of instruction were available for placement in this program. In the summer of 2002, two additional levels were made available: intermediary courses between 2nd- and 3rd-year Russian and between 3rd- and 4th-year Russian. Thus, in the summers of 2002 and 2003, there were seven levels of instruction (see Table 3).

Data for prior hours of classroom study at level 1 were problematic because most of the students had no prior study, but a few students had had 1 or 2 semesters of Russian language instruction. For this level, the median prior hours of instruction are more revealing: The median for hours of prior instruction in Russian for students at level 1 was 0 (zero) for both 2002 and 2003 cohorts. Readers might have expected to see consistently

increasing hours of prior instruction from level to level. Such a pattern, although ideal, does not reflect the real lives of a broad range of learners with diverse aptitudes and learning styles coming from different institutions (with stronger and weaker language programs), let alone the diversity of learning histories. For example, some students enrolled in the immersion program after an interruption in their Russian language learning experiences: At the time they took the placement tests, their knowledge of Russian, due to the interruption of their studies, was at a lower level than that of students who might have had fewer total hours of prior instruction.

Data from all five tests and the surveys of previous classroom instruction were analyzed by means of SAS or R (The R Project for Statistical Computing, version 1.6.1), depending on the focus of the question. For all statistical analyses, the Type I error rate was controlled at .05.

Speaking test results for the students who participated in an oral proficiency interview (sampling from each level of instruction) and for students who took the recorded oral exam were compared. Improvement in speaking skills from the pre- to postprogram tests ranged from 0 to 3 sublevels (e.g., an improvement from novice-high to intermediate-mid oral proficiency would be an improvement of 2 sublevels). Student scores were binned based on whether they had improved by two levels or more. The hypothesis was that the probability of an improvement of two levels or more would be the same for students who took the OPI and the oral exam (OE). This hypothesis was tested by means of Fisher's exact test. The resulting *p* value was .25, above the .05 level of

TABLE 3  
Enrollment Patterns, Prior Classroom Instruction (in Hours), and Prior Experience Abroad (in Months)

	2002			2003		
	<i>N</i>	Average Prior Hours in Classroom	Median Prior Months Abroad	<i>N</i>	Average Prior Hours in Classroom	Median Prior Months Abroad
1st-Year						
Level 1	24	17	0	16	26	0
Level 2	14	140	0	14	118	0
2nd-Year						
Level 3	16	189	0	17	203	0
Level 4	21	273	0	20	285	0
3rd-Year						
Level 5	19	295	0	18	337	0
Level 6	16	408	1	19	342	0
4th-Year						
Level 7	15	365	0	13	453	1
Total	125			117		

TABLE 4  
Improvement in Speaking Skills on Oral Exam  
versus Oral Proficiency Interview across All Levels  
of Instruction, 2001–2002

	OE	OPI	Total
No Improvement	29	7	36
1-Level Improvement	60	27	87
2-Level Improvement	40	9	49
3-Level Improvement	50	12	62
Total	179	55	234

*Note.* OE = oral exam; OPI = oral proficiency interview. No Improvement = no gain demonstrated from preprogram oral test score to postprogram oral test score. 1-level improvement = gain of one sublevel (e.g., from novice-high to intermediate-low) demonstrated from preprogram to postprogram oral test scores. 2-level improvement = gain of two sublevels (e.g., from novice-high to intermediate-mid) demonstrated from preprogram to postprogram oral test scores. 3-level improvement = gain of three sublevels (e.g., from novice-high to intermediate-high) demonstrated from preprogram to postprogram oral test scores.

confidence, and, hence, not within the region of rejection, as depicted in Table 4.

The null hypothesis was retained: Thus there is no association between method of testing and test results.

## DATA

### *The Current Study*

The data were collected pre- and postprogram, as described above. The data for both pre- and postprogram tests showed strong correlations, as depicted in Tables 5 and 6. The correlations among all five tests suggest that the rates of development in all four skills are closely interrelated. Moreover, and what is most interesting, the development of these four skills was also closely related with the development of grammatical competence, as reported by Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsberg (1993). The difference between correlations among tests administered in the preprogram testing and the correlations among tests administered in the postprogram testing merits further analysis.

Test scores from the preprogram testing correlated with hours of prior instruction for each of the five tests for students in the 2002 and 2003 cohorts. The elaboration of a mathematical relationship between hours of instruction, on the one hand, and levels of proficiency (in listening, reading, speaking, and writing), on the other hand, required the assignment of quantifiable measures to descriptors in the *Guidelines*. Various researchers have used different systems to quantify proficiency levels, most often using a system similar to the one

TABLE 5  
Correlations between Five Preprogram Tests, Summers 2002–2003

	Listening N = 229	Reading N = 229	Speaking N = 230	Writing N = 232	Grammar N = 233
Listening	1.00	.84	.74	.69	.82
Reading	.84	1.00	.77	.73	.80
Speaking	.74	.77	1.00	.79	.76
Writing	.69	.73	.79	1.00	.74
Grammar	.82	.80	.76	.74	1.00

*Note.* Probability  $> |r|$  under  $H_0$ :  $Rho = 0$ . For all correlations,  $p < .0001$ .

TABLE 6  
Correlations between Five Postprogram Tests, Summers 2002–2003

	Listening N = 233	Reading N = 228	Speaking N = 230	Writing N = 233	Grammar N = 233
Listening	1.00	.63	.65	.58	.66
Reading	.63	1.00	.56	.52	.63
Speaking	.65	.56	1.00	.73	.73
Writing	.58	.52	.73	1.00	.72
Grammar	.66	.63	.73	.72	1.00

*Note.* Probability  $> |r|$  under  $H_0$ :  $Rho = 0$ . For all correlations,  $p < .0001$ .

TABLE 7  
ACTFL, ILR, and Thompson Proficiency Levels

ACTFL Level	ILR Level	Thompson (1996)
Novice Low	0	0.1
Novice Mid	0	0.3
Novice High	0+	0.8
Intermediate Low	1	1.1
Intermediate Mid	1	1.3
Intermediate High	1+	1.8
Advanced	2	2.3
Advanced High	2+	2.8
Superior	3–5	3.3

*Note.* The distinction between advanced-low and advanced-mid proficiency in speaking and writing is not reflected in Thompson's scale because she published her study before the revision of these guidelines (1999 for speaking, 2001 for writing).

used in the governmental sector (ILR Proficiency Scale), such as Thompson's (1996) scale (see Table 7).

Thompson's scale and others similar to it were not used for this study because they did not adequately reflect the qualitative differences between functionality in each skill area from one major level to the next (e.g., novice, intermediate, advanced, superior). The scale adopted for the current project was ordinal and reflected the rankings of the levels of proficiency: Novice Low 1 to Superior 10.

The acquisition of grammatical competence is not explicitly related to a proficiency scale. The grammar test consisted of 100 items, and scores were reported on a scale of 1–100, with each grammar score depicting the number of correct answers a student provided.

The preprogram and postprogram scores of students at each level of instruction are depicted in Table 8.

Although it is interesting to compare test results by level of instruction, for the purposes of this

study, the correlation of test results with hours of classroom instruction was of greater importance. After the relationships between hours of instruction and performance on the five tests were calculated, 3 students who had had over 800 hours of prior instruction were removed from the analysis as outliers because their learning experiences were utterly atypical for students in a university Russian language curriculum. (In fact, all of these students had had military language training.) The results of the correlational analysis are depicted in Table 9. In this table, the slope represents the gain in each skill area (listening, reading, speaking, writing, and grammar) for each hour of classroom instruction. Intercept 1 represents what students could score without any classroom instruction. Students who had experience living in Russia, but no prior classroom instruction, could demonstrate some skill on the tests. Moreover, on the listening, reading, speaking, and writing tests, the lowest possible score, novice-low, is represented as a score of 1 on the scale used for this project, which does not distinguish between zero proficiency and novice-low proficiency.

The statistical relationships between hours of prior instruction and the acquisition of each skill and between hours of prior instruction and the acquisition of grammatical competence may be better visualized in graphs in which the acquisition of skills is plotted as a function of hours in classroom instruction. These relationships are depicted in Figures 1 and 2.

Taken together, Figures 1 and 2 offer a picture of postsecondary classroom-based Russian language instruction in the United States, providing an answer to the first research question of this project. On the scale used in Figure 1, students with advanced- or superior-level proficiency in any of the four skills would have scores of 7 or higher in that skill. As demonstrated in Figure 1, students with 600 hours of prior instruction still did not generally demonstrate advanced level proficiency

TABLE 8  
Mean Pre- and Postprogram Scores for Students in All Five Test Areas, by Level of Instruction (2002–2003)

Level	L1	L2	R1	R2	O1	O2	W1	W2	G1	G2
1	1.1	4.3	1.1	4.0	1.2	4.3	1.2	3.8	0.9	20.2
2	1.7	4.0	1.9	4.5	2.5	4.9	2.4	4.8	9.6	33.8
3	2.9	5.0	3.0	5.3	3.4	5.1	3.6	4.9	17.8	39.7
4	3.6	5.7	3.7	6.3	4.4	5.6	4.4	5.9	27.7	53.9
5	3.7	5.7	4.1	6.2	4.9	6.0	4.2	6.0	35.0	61.5
6	5.0	6.6	5.2	7.3	5.3	6.9	5.6	6.6	48.6	69.1
7	5.5	7.0	5.1	7.4	6.0	7.4	6.0	8.6	60.6	75.0

*Note.* L1 = preprogram listening score; L2 = postprogram listening score; R1 = preprogram reading score; R2 = postprogram reading score; O1, O2 = oral scores; W1, W2 = writing scores; G1, G2 = grammar scores.

TABLE 9  
Comparison of Acquisition: Traditional Classroom (Pre-Immersion Program) and Immersion Program

	Listening N = 225	Reading N = 224	Speaking N = 228	Writing N = 226	Grammar N = 227
Slope	.007	.007	.008	.008	.090
Intercept 1 (Pre-Immersion Program)	1.719	1.786	2.213	2.085	6.931
Intercept 2 <sup>a</sup> (Post-Immersion Program)	2.859	3.186	2.913	2.855	17.031

Note. In all cases,  $p < .0001$ .

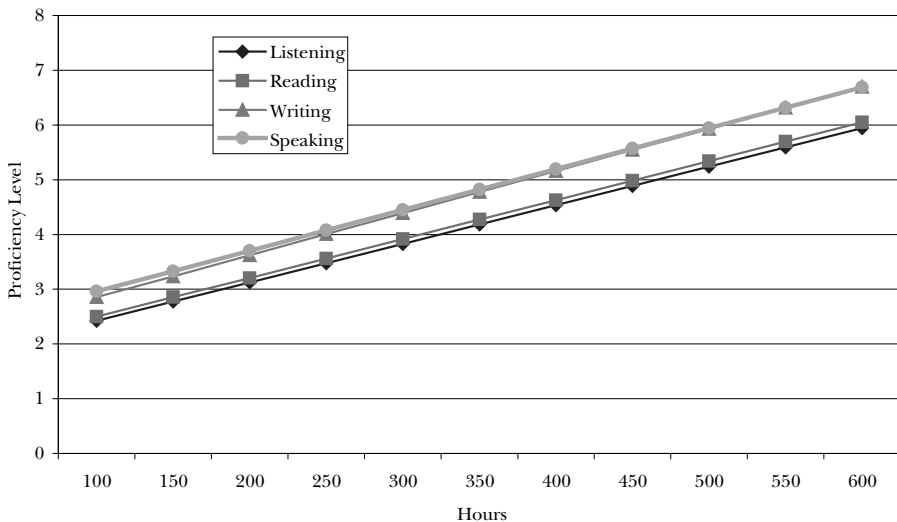
<sup>a</sup>Intercept 2 is projected to zero, although there were no cases with 0 hours of instruction at the time of postprogramming testing because even students with no prior instruction had 140 hours of instruction at the time the postprogram tests were administered.

in any of the four skill areas (listening, reading, speaking, writing). The students participating in this phase of the research project, over 200 students from institutions all across North America, constitute a sample of the product of Russian-language instruction at the postsecondary level. The data presented here therefore do not substantially differ from those of other researchers working on the acquisition of Russian, including Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsberg (1993), Davidson (2002, 2003), and Thompson (1996). The findings in the present study of intermediate-level proficiencies for students with 200 to 400 hours

of classroom instruction are also consistent with those of Magnan (1986) and Tschirner (1996) for French and German, respectively.

The second question posed in this study is whether or not immersion instruction offers students a richer basis for the acquisition of Russian than that offered by traditional classroom instruction. If the two settings, traditional classroom instruction and immersion instruction, were similar, then the rates of acquisition of each of the four proficiencies and of grammatical competence obtaining in the preprogram tests (2002, 2003) would be similar to the rates of acquisition

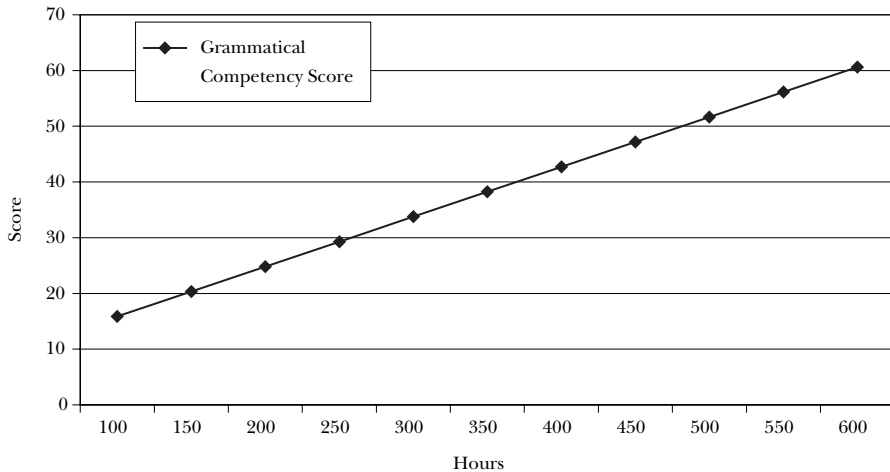
FIGURE 1  
Hours of Prior Instruction and Acquisition of Proficiency (2002–2003)



Note. N ranges from 224 to 228, depending on the test. Coefficient of variation ( $r^2$ ) ranges from .4031 to .4656, depending on the test.

FIGURE 2

Hours of Prior Instruction and Acquisition of Grammatical Competence (2002–2003)



Note.  $N = 227$ . Coefficient of variation ( $r^2$ ) = .4554.

obtaining in the postprogram tests. The preprogram tests were administered before any immersion instruction had begun; the postprogram tests were administered after the delivery of 140 hours of classroom instruction in the immersion context (but before the final 40 hours of the immersion program). If the two learning experiences were similar, scores from the postprogram test could be projected from the preprogram test scores, with the addition of another 140 hours of classroom instruction; in this case, the postprogram test scores would appear on the same curve as the preprogram test scores, simply moved to the right to represent more hours of instruction. In mathematical terms, the slopes and intercepts would be the same for data from both the pre- and postprogram testing. However, this was not the case. Intercept 2 on all five postprogram tests was higher, as depicted in Table 9, demonstrating greater gain in an immersion classroom setting than for the same number of hours in a traditional classroom setting.

The immersion effect was calculated by projecting scores for each of the four skills and grammatical competence on the basis of the linear model derived from the preprogram scores. The projected scores for each test were identified as the preprogram scores for an additional 140 hours of instruction. These projected scores were compared with actual scores obtained in the postprogram testing. If there were no immersion effect, one would expect the projected scores not to be significantly different from the post-

program scores. However, postprogram scores were significantly higher than projected scores in all test areas. The difference between projected scores and postprogram scores, constituting what I call “the benefit of immersion,” is depicted in Table 10.

The higher rates of acquisition in immersion classroom instruction, as compared to traditional classroom instruction, for the same number of hours in class, were supported by the data reported in Table 9. The data show that the immersion-based instruction was more efficient in leading students to greater acquisition of the four skills as well as grammatical competence than the traditional classroom instruction. Because the slopes are parallel, the difference in the acquisition in each instructional paradigm is represented in the two intercepts. Students gained more in 140 class hours of immersion instruction than they

TABLE 10  
Mean Benefit of Immersion, by Skill Area

	$N$	Mean Benefit of Immersion <sup>a</sup>	$t$	$p$
Listening	224	1.2759	15.83	.0001
Reading	226	1.5664	15.10	.0001
Speaking	229	0.8287	12.76	.0001
Writing	229	0.9249	10.38	.0001
Grammar	228	12.0800	10.62	.0001

<sup>a</sup>Mean postprogram test scores minus projected test scores of preprogram scores + 140 added hours of instruction.

did in 140 class hours of traditional, nonimmersion instruction.

#### *Comparison with Previous Findings*

The comparison of pre- and postprogram test results confirms data on traditional classroom instruction in other studies, such as the Foreign Service Institute's data on the number of hours of classroom instruction required to attain advanced or superior level proficiency in one or another language (as cited in Omaggio-Hadley, 2001). I have conducted annual assessments of learning outcomes in traditional classroom instruction in Russian at the University of Wisconsin–Madison (a program with approximately 160 students in 1st-through 4th-year Russian) every year since 2000, using the same tests for listening, reading, speaking, and grammar, and the same assessment scales, and I have observed substantially lower learning outcomes in each skill area and in grammar. In the traditional classroom context, students without immersion experiences typically completed 4th-year Russian classes with intermediate-low listening proficiency (4.0) and only intermediate-mid reading and speaking proficiency (5.0). Writing proficiency was not assessed in this other project. The students' grammatical competence was also lower, with students completing 4th-year Russian achieving an average score of only 47.1, compared to an average score of 75 among students at the same level in the immersion program.

The data from the Middlebury immersion program suggest that students with 600 or more hours of traditional classroom instruction barely reached intermediate-high proficiencies in listening, reading, speaking, and writing, whereas students who began an immersion program with between 400 and 450 hours of traditional classroom instruction typically did reach advanced level proficiencies in these skills with 140 hours of immersion classroom instruction. Of course, the nature of immersion means that students in an immersion learning experience have many more hours of listening and interacting in language than students in traditional classroom contexts. For example, students in the immersion program converse in Russian with one another, their teachers, and other native speakers in the dining hall at meals, in the dormitory corridors, at social events (such as karaoke evenings, films, or dance parties), and at formally organized clubs and activities (e.g., newspaper club, volleyball team). Although the traditional classroom student may have 3 to 5 hours of classroom interactions per week of instruction, the immersion student typically has over

100 hours of interactions per week of instruction, of which only 20 to 30 are in the classroom.

#### *Reconsidering the Scale*

The data reported here are based on the 1–10 scale presented earlier. This scale treats the distance between each proficiency level as standard. In other words, the scale used for this project assumes that the challenge of gaining sufficient language proficiency to improve from novice-high to intermediate-low is equal to the challenge of gaining sufficient language proficiency to improve from intermediate-high to advanced-low or from advanced-low to advanced-mid. This standard distance, in fact, does not reflect the explanation of the proficiency scale in the *ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview Tester's Manual* (Swender, 1999), which presents the scale as geometric in nature.

The scale . . . presumes that facility with a language increases exponentially within the various global tasks and throughout the hierarchy of tasks, rather than growing linearly in a merely additive fashion. Thus, the total spectrum of language performance is depicted as an inverted pyramid, rather than a line equally divided by the four major levels. (p. 11)

The depiction of the inverted pyramid (Swender, 1999) is a common visualization of the geometric difference between each major level in the proficiency scale according to which progressing from novice to intermediate is much easier than progressing from intermediate to advanced, and so forth. Accordingly, one could, in fact, posit the existence of another scale, such as the hypothetical one presented in Table 11.

The hypothesized scale presented in Table 11 assumes that attaining the superior level requires double the effort (or intellect or time) required

TABLE 11  
Hypothetical Scale Showing Geometrically Increasing Challenge of Each Successively Higher Proficiency Level

ACTFL Level	Current Scale	Hypothesized Scale
Novice Low	1	1
Novice Mid	2	2
Novice High	3	3
Intermediate Low	4	5
Intermediate Mid	5	7
Intermediate High	6	9
Advanced Low	7	13
Advanced Mid	8	17
Advanced High	9	21
Superior	10	29

for attaining the advanced level, which requires double the effort for attaining the intermediate level, and so forth. With the scale actually used for the current study, the linear relationships generated in the analysis fit the data quite well. However, these same relationships might not hold as well at higher proficiency levels, where one would expect performance to reach asymptote or level off in order to depict the greater number of hours (and effort) required to attain meaningful, that is, measurable, improvements at the upper range of the proficiency scale. The data collected in the current study showed that most students had performances at the novice and intermediate levels. Performances at the advanced level were most often reported at the postprogram testing session, and there were very few performances at the superior level at any time in the study. Moreover, the study showed acquisition only through approximately 600 hours of instruction. Research with more participants performing at the higher proficiency levels or with participants reporting substantially more than 600 hours of instruction, or both, would be necessary in order to determine the true nature of the relationship between proficiency and hours of instruction at this end of the pyramid. The ceiling effect seems to constrain students by limiting the learning outcomes in learning contexts typical of American postsecondary curricula (i.e., 400 or fewer classroom hours as will be discussed below), but may be even more limiting for students who have the opportunity to have more than 600 classroom hours, as well. However, that question lies beyond the scope of the present study.

## DISCUSSION

It is important to consider the data reported in the current study in light of the fact that many postsecondary Russian-language curricula do not offer many more than 400 hours of classroom instruction. Representatives of 56 postsecondary institutions in the United States responded to a survey on the listserv for Slavists (SEELANGs) and reported the number of hours of instruction their institutions offer in Russian in 1st-, 2nd-, 3rd-, and 4th-year Russian. Their answers were normalized against an average of 30 instructional weeks per year (whether in two 15-week semesters or three 10-week quarters). The data for Russian are not substantially different from the data for other languages; representatives of 35 postsecondary institutions responded to a similar survey on the listserv for foreign language program directors (FLASC). Data were collected for French,

TABLE 12  
Average Hours of Classroom Instruction per Week

	Russian ( <i>N</i> = 56)	French, German, or Spanish ( <i>N</i> = 36)
1st-Year	4.46	4.16
2nd-Year	3.97	3.63
3rd-Year	3.02	3.07
4th-Year	2.21	3.00
Total over 4 Years of Instruction	410.11	415.73

German, and Spanish; in some cases, data were reported for "Romance languages" and may have included Italian, Portuguese, and Romanian; see Table 12.

Given that students may require 600 or more hours of instruction to attain advanced level proficiency in one or more of the four modalities, the college or university intent on helping students achieve that goal would need to offer a Russian program with, on average, 5 hours of instruction per week, 30 weeks per year, for 4 years. Of the more than 80 institutions responding to both surveys, not a single curriculum offered that many hours of instruction.

The data reported here suggest that the acquisition of grammatical competence correlates with the acquisition of the four skills, as demonstrated for the five tests (Tables 5 and 6). The correlation of the acquisition of grammatical competence with the acquisition of each of the four skills would seem to confirm the experience of some foreign language instructors working with students who have returned from an extended residency abroad with limited formal instruction in the language. Naturalistic acquisition, the acquisition of a second language in country (for instance, by Peace Corps workers), may bump up against a ceiling, as well. Indeed, research by Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsberg (1993) suggested that the best predictor of attainment of advanced level proficiency during study abroad is grammatical competence, competence typically built in a traditional classroom experience. Thus, we should not be fooled into thinking that classroom instruction does not play a role in long-term attainment.

Most important, the findings suggest that the typical university foreign language program does not offer enough classroom instructional hours to help students achieve advanced level proficiencies if the students begin their study of the language in university and do not participate in an immersion experience. In fact, traditional classroom Russian language learning is, most likely, constrained by a

ceiling just below the advanced level. Without an immersion experience, students of Russian will likely find it difficult, if not impossible, to break through this ceiling into advanced level proficiencies. This phenomenon, I would argue, represents a ceiling effect for traditional foreign language classroom instruction, a learning experience in which students can, at best, interact in language only a few hours a week (as described in Table 12). The best way, perhaps the only way, for students to break through this ceiling is to begin their language study in a traditional classroom setting and then to participate in immersion learning experiences, whether in the United States or abroad.

The hypothesized ceiling should not be construed as an immovable barrier positioned at the same level for all students in all languages for two reasons. First, Russian is classified by the United States Defense Language Institute as a "category 3 language" in terms of the difficulties (e.g., heavily inflected morphology and complicated system of verbal aspect) that it poses to learners who are native speakers of English. Students of languages in categories 1 and 2, such as the Romance languages and Swahili and Germanic languages, respectively, might well be constrained by a "higher ceiling" than students of category 3 languages, whereas students of category 4 languages, such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, might be constrained by a "lower ceiling." Indeed, as reported by Omaggio-Hadley (2001), the Defense Language Institute determined that learners with average language aptitude for a category 1 language (such as French or Spanish) need 720 hours of instruction to attain advanced-high oral proficiency; similar learners of a category 2 language (such as German) attain only advanced oral proficiency in the same 720 hours. The situation is worse with category 3 languages (such as Russian), for which learners need 1,320 hours to attain advanced-high oral proficiency. For category 4 languages (such as Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese), 1,320 hours of instruction produces only advanced level oral proficiency. Foreign Service Institute data, as reported by Jackson and Kaplan (2001), show similar correlations of class hours required to attain similar learning outcomes.

The second reason why the ceiling posited in the current study should not be construed as a fixed barrier at the same level for all students in all languages is that the students enrolled in the immersion program for this project are likely not representative of students in the general postsecondary student population for a number of reasons. They elected to study Russian, a category 3 language, according to the Defense Language

Institute, that is studied by only 1.7% of all the students studying foreign languages at the university level (Welles, 2004). By choosing to study in the summer, they gave up the possibility of summer vacation or earnings and, in all cases, paid at least some of the costs of tuition and room and board for the summer learning experience (i.e., not studying on 100% financial aid, scholarship, or grant). They selected an immersion program, which required them to study in isolation from loved ones, friends, and others in their social support network. And they chose to study in a language-pledge environment, giving up the right to speak English for the duration of the summer program and making themselves subject to the possibility of expulsion without refund or academic credit for violation of the language pledge.

All of these factors suggest that the students enrolled in this summer program may well have been more highly motivated than students who did not choose to study in this program. One cannot argue that these students were more talented or had greater language learning aptitude than a more representative sample of university foreign language students. However, if greater motivation can be correlated with greater language learning success, the hypothesized ceiling might well be lower than at the intermediate-high/advanced threshold for a more representative population than the ceiling posited for the learners participating in this research project.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRICULAR POLICY

In light of increased demand for foreign language expertise at higher proficiency levels, the current study's findings would suggest that those planning and delivering postsecondary foreign language instruction should consider the following issues carefully.

1. Given that the development of grammatical competence is correlated with the development of proficiency in the four skill areas, the teaching of grammar and syntax should be integrated into the foreign language curriculum at all levels.
2. Because students in traditional classroom settings are constrained by the ceiling effect, curricula should be designed to offer the fullest possible sequences. Students should be offered 4 years of instruction (or more) with, whenever possible, 5 hours of classroom instruction per week.
3. Language program directors should plan motivation-enhancing activities in the curriculum so that students will want to continue language learning beyond the context of the 4-year

curriculum. This goal can be accomplished by sponsoring events, such as inviting study abroad veterans to talk about their experiences abroad and inviting language program alumni who use the language on the job to talk about their work experiences.

4. Language program directors should not hold out false hope for fluency in 2 years of instruction; language programs with short or shallow curricula should focus on cultural goals and help promote student interest in further study. Students, administrators, parents, and members of the community should be informed of likely language learning outcomes for shorter and longer sequences of instruction, with and without immersion experiences, as well as opportunities for advanced- or superior-level language experts to use their language skills in professional contexts.

5. Language program directors and instructors should work with college and university administrators, students, parents, and members of the community to build support for immersion experiences both at home and abroad. Support for immersion experiences includes reducing administrative and financial obstacles hindering student participation and helping students plan to include immersion experiences in their academic programs. To that end, program directors and instructors should work with "immersion veterans" so that their voices can be heard in the classroom, as well as in committee meetings focusing on curricular issues.

Institutions that cannot offer extended learning sequences should not give up the teaching of foreign languages. Students can get a good start in a 2- or 1-year program and continue their language learning elsewhere. Moreover, the teaching of foreign languages in a liberal arts curriculum should not be focused exclusively on the attainment of language proficiency. Indeed, students enrolled in foreign language classes at any level of instruction learn a great deal about other cultural perspectives, which helps them understand their own cultural identities and their own native languages better. Students in language classes also often learn good study skills, including listening and reading strategies, as well as public speaking skills and group interaction skills, all of which can be applied in other contexts within and beyond the university-level curriculum. All of these are important goals for foreign language and cultural learning at the postsecondary level.

When we compare the data on Russian language gain in study abroad (Brecht, Davidson,

& Ginsberg, 1993; Davidson, 2002, 2003) with the language gains shown by students in the Middlebury Russian School summer immersion program, reported in the current study, it is clear that students going abroad do not necessarily make gains as significant as those made by students in the Middlebury immersion program. Indeed, Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsberg (1993) reported that only approximately 40% of those students participating in a semester-long study abroad program who entered with intermediate level oral proficiency completed the program with advanced level speaking skills. Unfortunately, it is not possible to make a neater comparison on the basis of hours of prior instruction, because such data were not reported in the 1993 study. However, students participating both in study abroad programs and in the Middlebury immersion program report anecdotally that they felt they had greater improvement in their language skills in the Middlebury immersion program. Freed, Segalowitz, and Dewey (2004) came to the same conclusion in their comparison of language gain of students in a study abroad program in France and that of students participating in the Middlebury French School summer immersion program. These scholars attribute the greater language gain demonstrated by immersion students to the fact that

students in the IM [domestic immersion] contexts reported devoting significantly more time to using French in out-of-class activities compared not only to the students in the AH [traditional foreign language classroom at home institution] context but also to those in the SA [study abroad] context. In fact, students in the SA context reported using English in out-of-class contact [more] than they did using French. (p. 294)

The pattern that I have observed for students learning Russian, confirmed by Freed, Segalowitz, and Dewey (2004) for students learning French, may, in fact, be relevant for many students in diverse languages. There may be several factors contributing to the greater language gain for Middlebury summer immersion students.

1. There is a language pledge in the Middlebury immersion program. With no language pledge on many study abroad programs, students often find themselves speaking English with other American students and with target-language native speakers who want to practice their English.

2. Cultural differences (dormitory or home stay, dining, health and fitness, etc.) require cognitive processing during study abroad, reflection

that often must be carried out in the native language rather than in the target language. American students typically experience many fewer cultural differences in a domestic immersion program than they do on study abroad and therefore can dedicate time and energy exclusively to language acquisition in the domestic immersion setting.

3. The structure of a domestic immersion program puts the students in regular contact with instructors who are target-language native speakers and other native speakers sympathetic to their struggles as language learners. The study abroad program requires students to interact with a broader range of native speakers, not all of whom are sympathetic to the learning process.

It is certainly not my intention here, or elsewhere, to discourage students from participating in study abroad programs, but merely to suggest that students might be better prepared to get the most out of study abroad experiences by first participating in a domestic immersion program, such as Middlebury's. When students participate in a domestic immersion program before going abroad, they may be better prepared to take advantage of the rich input and interactional opportunities in the study abroad program. Instead of merely asking "where" and "what" questions, they will be better prepared to ask "why" and "how" questions and to engage in serious discussion of sophisticated topics with native speaker interlocutors, gaining not only in linguistic but also cultural proficiency as they do so. Carroll (1967) noted that

Time spent abroad is clearly one of the most potent variables we have found, and this is not surprising, for reasons that need not be belabored. Certainly our results provide a strong justification for a "year abroad" as one of the experiences to be recommended for the language majors. . . . The attainment of skill in a foreign language is a function of the amount of time spent in its study. (p. 137)

The current study does not refute Carroll's findings concerning these particular points; rather it supports them with quantitative evidence gathered from the learning of Russian in traditional and immersion classroom contexts. Although the data here are from Russian, the conclusions drawn may well be relevant to the study of other languages at the postsecondary level. Language program directors and instructors, mindful of the existence of a ceiling effect in traditional foreign language classroom instruction, should vigorously advocate for their students to participate in both domestic immersion experiences and

study abroad programs in order to attain the best possible language learning outcomes.

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## APPENDIX A

### Sample Test Items

#### LISTENING

All questions and student responses are in English; all listening texts are in Russian.

##### *Novice Level*

Respond to the questions in English.

Sample question: What's your name?

Sample question: In what city do you live?

##### *Intermediate Level*

Listen to the text and answer the questions in English.

Text: Answering machine message

Questions: Who called? Why? What is his phone number? When does he expect to meet you? Where does he expect to meet you?

##### *Advanced Level*

Listen to the text and answer the questions in English.

Text: Obituary of famous engineer who designed many Soviet airplanes

Questions: Who is this text about? Why is the report being given (on what occasion)? What are five significant details of his or her life?

##### *Superior Level*

Listen to the text and answer the questions in English.

Text: Report on changes to rules governing visas for foreigners.

Question: Summarize the text in 60–80 words. Describe the consequences of the changes discussed in the text and analyze the structure of the argument, identifying any weaknesses or lapses in the logic (60–80 words).

#### READING

All questions and student responses are in English; all reading texts are in Russian.

##### *Novice Level*

Identify the signs in English

Texts: Exit, No Smoking, and so forth

##### *Intermediate-Low Level*

Read the text and answer the questions in English.

Text: Television program schedule

Questions: If you want to watch the news as early as you can, what is the name of the earliest news show, at what time and on what channel is it broadcast? Name three mystery or detective shows your friend can watch on Tuesday.

*Intermediate-High Level*

Read the texts and answer the question in English.

Texts: Two paragraphs from each of two articles on a flood, plane crash, or earthquake, each of which provides a different explanation for the causes of disaster or the factors contributing to a problem in disaster relief

Question: Provide a summary of 30 words or less explaining the difference in the two texts' explanations of the events.

*Advanced Level*

Read the text and answer the question in English.

Text: Survey of Russians' changing attitudes toward America and Americans

Question: Write a summary of 60–80 words of the information that is important for your supervisor at the American Embassy.

*Superior Level*

Read the text and answer the questions in English.

Text: Analysis of migration patterns in Russia and the former Soviet Republics

Questions: Write a summary of the text in 100–120 words. Then analyze the text for ideological bias in the author's argument, considering important information that might have been omitted from the text or the text's implications.

**SPEAKING**

All questions and student responses are in Russian.

*Novice Level*

What's your name? Where are you from?

*Intermediate Level*

Why did you decide to study Russian?

Tell me about your academic or career plans.

*Advanced Level*

Describe your best friend.

Tell me about one of your favorite films.

*Superior Level*

Describe opposing perspectives on an important political, social, or economic program in the United States or in your home country.

How would your life have been different had you not decided to study Russian?

**WRITING**

(Students write for 90 minutes on prompts without help from dictionaries, textbooks, or other reference works. They are told to write as much and as well as they can to show off their Russian at its best.)

*Novice–Advanced Levels* (level determined by student function)

My hometown, A person I admire, A funny thing happened on the way to . . .

*Superior Level*

Describe opposing perspectives on an important political, social, or economic program in the United States or in your home country. How would political, social, or economic conditions have developed differently had a particular solution been implemented (when in fact it was not)?

**GRAMMAR**

Entire text is in Russian except for cues in English. Students fill in the blanks with the correct form of the missing word or phrase in Russian (italicized items are blanks in the Russian text, with English cues for translation into Russian.)

Once, \_\_\_\_\_, she \_\_\_\_\_ for the store, while the boy was lying in bed, \_\_\_\_\_ to the raindrops on the window. Suddenly he \_\_\_\_\_ the front door open and his mother told \_\_\_\_\_, "come in". And then the boy saw \_\_\_\_\_ both. They were completely soaked, \_\_\_\_\_ someone had dunked them in a barrel of water. The \_\_\_\_\_ boy was the \_\_\_\_\_ age he was, about six or seven years old, while the girl was still a toddler, maybe three years old. \_\_\_\_\_ were both wearing galoshes on their bare feet, \_\_\_\_\_ it was already \_\_\_\_\_ of August.

*Note.* In order to maintain the security of this test, the Russian language version is not provided here.

## APPENDIX B

### List of Institutions Represented by Student Participants 2001–2003

Agnes Scott College	Harvard University	University of Houston
American University	Haverford College	University of Kansas
Amherst College	Illinois Wesleyan University	University of Kentucky
Bard College	Indiana University	University of Maryland
Barnard College	Johns Hopkins University	University of Michigan
Bates College	Kenyon College	University of New Hampshire
Beloit College	Lawrence University	University of North Carolina– Chapel Hill
Bennington College	Lehigh University	University of Oklahoma
Bowdoin College	Macalester College	University of Pennsylvania
Brandeis University	Middlebury College	University of Pittsburgh
Brown University	Mt. Holyoke College	University of Puget Sound
Boston University	North Carolina State University	University of Rochester
Bucknell University	Northeastern University	University of Southern Maine
California State University–Bakersfield	New York University	University of Tennessee
California State University–Fresno	Oberlin College	University of Texas–Arlington
Carleton College	Occidental College	University of Texas–Austin
Colby College	Ohio State University	University of Toronto
College of Charleston	Reed College	Union College
Columbia University	San Francisco City College	University of Utah
Connecticut College	San Francisco State University	University of Vermont
Cornell University	Smith College	University of Virginia
City University of New York	St. Olaf's College	University of Wisconsin–Madison
Dartmouth College	Stanford University	Vassar College
Denver University	Swarthmore College	Virginia Tech
Drew University	Trinity University (Texas)	Washington University (St. Louis)
Duke University	University of California–Berkeley	Wellesley College
Erskine College	University of California–Los Angeles	Wesleyan University
Georgetown University	University of California–Santa Barbara	Williams College
Gustavus Adolphus College	University of Chicago	
George Washington University	University of Connecticut	
Hampshire College		

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