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## A Ceiling Effect for Communicative Language Teaching?

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Byrnes (1997) has argued that “communicative language teaching in the United States has become strongly associated with highly personalized . . . context-dependent interactional orality, though it need not inherently have that thrust” (p. 9). She objected to “a constricted view of communication [that] might seriously detract from the intellectual self-representations higher education must make” (p. 9). Indeed, some scholars have argued that proficiency-oriented instruction or instruction focused on the development of students’ communicative competence devotes too much curricular time to transactional oral language use at the expense of the development of students’ literacy skills. Outcomes studies (including my own, Rifkin, 2005), which demonstrate less than excellent results for U.S. college foreign language (FL) instruction, might be interpreted as evidence that the proficiency movement has indeed constrained student achievement. I would argue, however, that this represents a failure not of the proficiency or standards movements, but rather a failure of the profession to develop coherent curricula.

One of the most significant problems with curricula in higher education in the United States is that instructors rarely seem to discuss them. What passes for curriculum is more often than not a collection of individual courses taught by individual faculty members, lecturers, adjunct instructors, and graduate student teaching assistants with little or no awareness of the existence of courses taught by other individuals, let alone a collaboratively constructed intentional sequence of learning experiences. Therefore, given the widespread lack of true curricula (collaboratively constructed intentional learning sequences), any failure of proficiency-oriented programs to produce students with advanced-level skills cannot be construed as a failure of the proficiency movement

per se. Rather, such failures can be predicted precisely because of the lack of authentic curricular planning.

Let me elaborate. The proficiency movement is often evaluated on the basis of its biggest success and its biggest enrollments: lower division courses that teach students to use the four skills on the intermediate level as defined by the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines*. The textbook markets for the most commonly taught (and, indeed, some of the less commonly taught) languages are replete with products with a wide range of ancillaries, including video programs, Web sites with interactive multimedia activities, and test banks. Whatever the breadth and depth of the textbook market at the first- and second-year levels for many of the languages we teach in colleges, the same cannot be said of the situation for third- and fourth-year courses, let alone courses for heritage speakers or for students who have participated in immersion experiences in the United States or abroad. The successes associated with first- and second-year FL courses may be seen as the yin that is inversely related to the yang of the failure of upper division and graduate courses to enable students to use language consistently for understanding and creating propositionally and linguistically sophisticated texts.

It is important to remember that the proficiency movement does not prioritize in its theoretical framework the teaching of oral communication skills. Even so, in practice, the teaching of oral communication skills may have been prioritized due to the confluence of a number of circumstances, including (a) the legacy of the audiolingual movement, (b) students’ interest in learning to communicate in speech, and (c) the development of the oral proficiency interview. In fact, there is nothing inherent in the *Proficiency Guidelines* that would suggest that listening, reading,

or writing is in any way inferior to speaking as a learning goal. Furthermore, there is nothing inherent in the *National Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (1996) that would suggest the subordination of reading, listening, or writing skills to speaking.

Scholars who argue for teaching toward literacy as something distinct from teaching for proficiency may not understand the nature of the *Proficiency Guidelines*, the nature of the *Standards*, and the place of these two frameworks in the elaboration of a well-designed curriculum. Those instructors teaching upper level literature courses (literature in the original) who bemoan the students' lack of preparation to read original texts are justified in their complaint, but so are the instructors teaching lower level courses who object to the lack of oral interaction in the FL in upper level literature or culture courses. The principal obstacle to curricular success is the lack of communication between these two groups of instructors on opposite sides of a chasm that is supposed to be traversed by the notorious "bridge course."

Part of the problem is, no doubt, the lack of realistic expectations on the part of some of the stakeholders in the FL learning enterprise. Students who assume they can become fluent speakers of German after completing a 2-semester FL requirement are just as ill-informed as instructors of Japanese literature who believe that students completing 2 years of Japanese language classes (at 6 contact hours per week) are ready to read authentic novels in Japanese and write essays in Japanese, analyzing metaphor in these novels. Indeed, a look at some of the most popular first- and second-year college Russian textbooks suggests an average increase in vocabulary of about 1,000 words per year of instruction. A nonheritage student in a course called "Third-Year Russian" or "Intermediate Russian" is unlikely to have more than 2,000 words in his or her active vocabulary, which is surely not the profile of a student ready to read Dostoevsky in the original. And yet many intermediate Russian courses assign Dostoevsky, as well as other challenging authors. Clifford (2002) has argued:

There may be shortcuts to "survival" level language capability, but if the end goal is "Advanced" (ILR Level 2) or higher, these shortcuts are at best detours, and they may be dead-end streets. Time on task is the primary determiner of language acquisition, and there is no shortcut to attaining proficiency in either one's first or second language.

In order to improve the product of FL instruction in the United States, by which I mean the

quality and quantity of U.S. college graduates who can not only speak but also read sophisticated texts in an FL, those who deliver this instruction must work together to articulate curricula that lead to the achievement of just this goal.

The solution to the problem is that all stakeholders in the FL learning and teaching dynamic must demonstrate some communicative competence with one another—K–12 teachers, college and university teachers at all ranks, students at all levels, heritage and traditional learners, department chairs, language center directors, college and university administrators, community center FL teachers, alumni, and potential employers. The curriculum for communicative language instruction should require the interpretation of written and spoken texts, including literary texts, in their cultural context at the introductory and intermediate levels for all languages, even the less commonly taught languages, as preparation for ever greater and more sophisticated learning challenges at each step of the curriculum. Similarly, work with texts at the advanced college level should be structured so that students can participate in textual analysis rather than being bystanders, for example, as reported by Donato and Brooks (2004). The well-articulated language curriculum should build learning tasks one upon the other as students reach toward ever greater language accomplishments.

The beauty of the *Proficiency Guidelines* is the clarity with which they establish a series of learning benchmarks from one level to the next, for any target language. Using the same measure, instructors of any language teaching at any level can discuss realistic goals for achievement in each of the four skill areas for each level of instruction. The RAILS (Russian Advanced Interactive Listening Series) project at the University of Wisconsin–Madison is a product of just such collaboration: faculty in English as a second language, French, Hebrew, Japanese, Swahili, and Yoruba, among other languages, worked together to articulate learning objectives for a predecessor project from which the Russian RAILS project had grown (see: <http://imp.lss.wisc.edu/~t4flp/> and <http://imp.lss.wisc.edu/rails/>). The beauty of the *Standards* is the clarity with which they establish a range of learning goals and modalities for instruction. Diverse instructors working in any teaching context can share common goals, such as helping students use texts in the target language to make connections among disciplines and to draw comparisons between cultures at ever more sophisticated levels of expression.

These two documents, the *Proficiency Guidelines* and the *Standards*, can and should be the basis for the development of a well-articulated curriculum informed by the interests, passions, and needs of all the stakeholders in the FL learning enterprise. In those rare instances when stakeholders have come together to elaborate a curriculum, as they have in some departments in a few colleges and universities across the United States, the results can be truly impressive (e.g., German at Georgetown, Russian at Wisconsin–Madison, Chinese and Japanese at Ohio State and the University of Hawai‘i, or the summer immersion language schools at Middlebury College). Our students and, indeed, our national interests, demand that FL learning produce the very best results. We can certainly do better. The key to developing students’ literacy skills lies in expanding the notion of communicative competence beyond the narrowly constrained approach demonstrated in many lower division FL programs to the more comprehensive definition, as envisioned both by the *Proficiency Guidelines* and the *Standards*, designing and implementing curricula and providing the necessary resources, including time on task (contact hours) to help students achieve the lofty goals we set for them. Communicative language teaching based on the *Proficiency Guidelines* and the *Standards* is, I argue, the best approach for helping students attain the highest possible out-

comes in FL learning. Adopting a communicative approach to language teaching, however, does not excuse instructors from the obligation of curricular planning designed to help students attain not only the transactional oral competence typical of introductory language sequences, but also literacy and cultural skills that seem, in many cases, to elude us.

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## Communicative Collaboration: Language, Literature, and Communicative Competence Redefined

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It hardly bears repeating: The language–literature divide in modern foreign language (FL) departments is well known, longstanding, and felt deeply. One has only to consider the spate of recent articles and books pointing to the wide implications of “the split” for nearly all aspects of the undergraduate and graduate FL enterprise: curriculum development, management of (declining) enrollments, proportional distribution of service responsibilities and institutional resources, professional status and prestige, as well as issues related to hiring, tenure, and promotion. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, it is primarily colleagues in the fields of second language acquisition (SLA) and applied linguistics who have worked in a focused way to examine the hierarchical gap in language departments and who offer suggestions on how and why we must bridge it.

Now, however, it appears that even the stakeholders of power in the hierarchies of FL programs are in the uncanny, and similarly uncomfortable, position of “other.” FL literature faculty are themselves increasingly being called to justify their status—and even their existence—in the academy. A quick scan of the professional landscape shows that FL programs (especially those other than Spanish) are clinging against odds to their disciplinary lives as once traditionally constituted. As the halls of higher education now echo with the buzzwords and noble calls for multiculturalism and multilingualism, it is paradoxically in monolingual English departments that much of the theoretical and pedagogical heavy lifting has been taking place. If we keep in mind the influence, in the humanities, of scholars writing in languages other than English (e.g., Bakhtin,