

Foreign Language

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Proficiency Curriculums

Ask any foreign language teacher what the buzzword is today, and you'll hear "proficiency." But *proficiency* is an incomplete term. To explain what it means to know another language, in essence, is to answer: "Proficient to do what? Under what circumstances? And how well?"

What is a proficiency curriculum?

Traditional curriculums have usually identified what students *know about* language; in contrast, a proficiency-based curriculum identifies what students will be able to *do* with language. Whereas traditional curriculums have focused on knowing grammar rules and vocabulary, the proficiency curriculum stresses *knowing in action*—putting grammar, vocabulary, and cultural knowledge at the service of communication. Some of the elements involved in a proficiency curriculum are discussed below.

Is grammar taught in a proficiency curriculum?

Yes, but there is considerable debate about how much grammar should be taught, how important accuracy is at various points of students' language development, and the nature and role of appropriate approaches to error correction. At one extreme are those who argue that "getting the message across" is the primary criterion on which students should be evaluated; at the other are those who believe that unless grammatical accuracy is stressed from the outset, students will "fossilize" in their error patterns. Conflicting research results support both positions. Many take a balanced approach, advocating that errors should be corrected during activities in which the focus is on mastering grammatical structures but uncorrected when the purpose of activities is to foster communicative skills.

Is proficiency just speaking skills?

One of the big misconceptions about the proficiency movement is that it is exclusively concerned with oral skills. In part, this misapprehension stems

from the emphasis given to a metric to assess foreign language oral proficiency, developed in the early 1980s by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, in conjunction with the Educational Testing Service.

The ACTFL/ETS rating scales provided for the first time this century a standardized instrument to measure the oral language development of secondary and post-secondary students. The widespread attention given the scales, combined with a growing consensus that at the early levels of language instruction aural/oral skills deserve more (but not exclusive) attention than written skills, contributed to the notion that "proficiency" meant abandoning instruction in the written forms of communication. In fact, proficiency must be both oral and written.

What does a proficiency lesson look like?

Like a kaleidoscope that creates new patterns from existing elements when its barrel is turned, the proficiency classroom rearranges elements from traditional instruction into new configurations. Instruction in grammar and vocabulary persist, laying the foundation for other, more open-ended activities, which provide students extensive opportunities to use language for communicative purposes—that is, involve a real exchange of information—with the teacher and with one another.

Students should not, as one author has wryly stated, be asked to perform unnatural acts with language. This means avoiding silly display questions ("What's your name? Are you a boy or a girl?") or requiring students to communicate in ways inappropriate to their real-life needs (e.g., asking a 7th grader to write a check in French). To the degree feasible, activities parallel the kinds of tasks students need to be able to perform in the foreign language. These might include scanning advertisements or television listings, skimming for details in a newspaper

or magazine, or reading for literal and inferential meaning in a longer text or piece of literature.

Writing tasks for novice learners may be as simple as making lists as personal reminders, writing brief notes or simple correspondence; more advanced learners use writing to express their feelings, to inform or to persuade a known or unknown reader. As with aural/oral skills, knowledge of grammar and vocabulary serve to support and enhance written communication, but mastery of these language skills is not an end in itself.

Culture plays an important role in the proficiency classroom, since it is virtually impossible to communicate effectively without knowledge of the cultural context in which language operates. A host of shared cultural assumptions underlie the meanings of words—even when the words themselves seem to have the same referents in each culture. Such simple terms as *bread*, *my house*, *my family* are associated with significantly different constellations of experiences, attitudes, and values in the U.S. as compared with other countries and cultures. How you may speak to people in most Romance, Germanic, and Asian languages depends on your relationship with them. The proficiency curriculum seeks to ensure that students both understand the intents of others and communicate their own with cultural appropriateness.

How do instructional materials support a proficiency curriculum?

Most of the new textbooks that claim to be "proficiency" oriented organize course content along a hierarchical sequence of grammar topics almost identical to that of the last 30 years. Where they differ is in the extent to which grammar practice is made meaningful and communicative. But so far few texts have begun from the premise of identifying the real-life situations in which students might need

to communicate, using these as the organizing principle of the text and then developing a sequence of grammar skills, vocabulary, and cultural knowledge needed to perform effectively in these situations. Because the proficiency curriculum connects language to its real-life uses in the target culture, instruction draws heavily on authentic print and nonprint materials taken directly from the target culture.

What do foreign language teachers need? Proficiency-based foreign language instruction represents a major paradigmatic shift in our profession. Teachers need resources in order to put this new approach into action. First, they need significant opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills required. Second, if teachers are to put their new knowledge, skills, and attitudes to good use, support for

curriculum development and the purchase of up-to-date, proficiency-oriented print and nonprint resources is needed. With these resources, teachers can begin to help students develop the foreign language skills that will be essential in the 21st century. □

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Minority Education

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African American: What's in a Name?

The term *African American* is gaining strong support among educators as a replacement for the terms *Black* and *Black American*. Former NEA President Mary Hatwood Futrell stated: "We have come full circle. It was not too long ago that we were calling ourselves Afro-American. It is significant and important that we remember our cultural heritage with Africa. Our young people should learn to understand and appreciate this link. If the term *African* versus *Black* will move us in that direction, it is a positive step."

Outside the educational realm, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, because of his high visibility, was one of the first to bring the term to national attention. Other leaders who endorse *African American* include: Coretta Scott King; former mayors Andrew Young of Atlanta and Richard Hatcher of Gary, Indiana; Ramona Edelin, president of the National Urban Coalition; and Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, who now uses the term in his written court opinions.

New terms represent no more than an attempt by a people to connect themselves to the present agenda. Educators must recognize that "Black and proud" is a historical statement of the past. Once upon a time there were *colored* and *Negro*. *Black* reflected the growing self-determination of the

1960s. Now, *African American* reflects a higher level consciousness of cultural integrity for the future. In 1989, *Black* is to *African American* what *Negro* was to *Black* 25 years ago.

As an indicator of cultural identity, *Black* pales next to such terms as *Native American*, *Asian American*, *Hispanic American*, *Italian American*, *Greek American*, and *Polish American*. Present-day curriculums have been revised to reflect awareness of various ethnic peoples and minority groups, but many have yet to include the term *African American*. Noted social psychologist and historian Asa Hilliard III (1989) believes that schools can improve communication and help children develop positive self-concepts and an awareness of cultural origins

by using *African American* to describe children of that descent.

What's in a name? Recently, Terrell, and Taylor (1988) studied the self-concepts of African-American adolescents and their parents. The subjects were divided into two categories: those with anglicized names and those with African names. Results showed that those with African names scored higher on measures of self-esteem.

Educators, usually traditional and middle-class in their values, are sometimes slow to recognize nontraditional voices. But with all the recent emphasis on learning styles, multicultural education, and high-risk students, educators would do well to use terminology which speaks to culture and self-concept. It is far better that teachers—rather than their students—initiate this process. After all, who is leading whom? □

References

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