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0521816572 - Developing Professional-Level Language Proficiency

Edited by Betty Lou Leaver and Boris Shekhtman

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Developing professional-level language proficiency

This comprehensive book examines approaches to teaching students who aim to make the leap from “Advanced” or “Superior” proficiency in a foreign language to “Distinguished” or “near-native” ability. While there are copious publications on classroom techniques and methods for lower levels of instruction, virtually nothing exists about this transition, which is vital for those who intend to use foreign languages in high-level international arenas. Written by leading practitioners in this area of foreign language teaching, this book aims to fill the gap and assist those developing language programs that lead from the “Advanced” to the “Distinguished” level.

- Divided into three parts which provide information on different aspects of teaching at this level:
 - theory of advanced language teaching
 - nine sample programs
 - description of highly advanced learners based on long-term experience and empirical research
- Presents programs in seven languages – Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Russian, Spanish
- Content is both theoretical and pragmatic

BETTY LOU LEAVER is Director of the Center for the Advancement of Distinguished Language Proficiency at San Diego State University. She has published extensively in the area of foreign and second language acquisition (theory, teaching, learning, research), Russian culture and linguistics, and general learning theory.

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*Center for the Advancement
of Distinguished Language Proficiency
San Diego State University*

and

Boris Shekhtman

Specialized Language Training Center



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UNIVERSITY PRESS

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Times 10/12 pt *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

ISBN 0 521 81657 2 hardback
ISBN 0 521 01685 1 paperback

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Foreword

In nations around the world, the study of a second or third language is the norm, often beginning in elementary school and continuing through secondary school and into the university. The result is that by the time they graduate from the system students often reach a degree of functional competence that enables them to use the language – often English – in their personal and professional lives. By contrast, in English-speaking countries like the United States, the study of Languages Other Than English (LOTEs) does not occupy a central place in the educational system, nor does it typically result in usable competence. The education system in the United States often struggles simply to justify and then provide instruction in LOTEs since the need for such competence is less obvious to US educational policy makers and to the general citizenry in light of the perceived status of English around the world.

Developments in recent times seem to be changing the situation in English-speaking countries, where globalization and immigration have produced a sea change with regard to language use and learning. If one takes the USA as an example, the need for language competence in the public and private sectors is dire, as demand is exploding and the supply is patently inadequate.¹ The problem is that the US educational system is simply not structured to meet current – let alone anticipated – language demand, as too few students study a LOTE for long enough to reach any level of functional competence (Brecht and Rivers, 2000). While a strategic solution to this problem is obviously warranted, the immediate need in the USA is for programming in schools, colleges, and universities capable of producing high-level language competency across a range of critical languages and relevant professions with a growing global practice. However, language educators in US schools, colleges, and universities have almost no experience in such programming, given the fact that to this point they have not enjoyed the luxury of working in a system that has students spending years studying one language. Nor are language educators in non-English-speaking countries necessarily of much assistance in this regard, for traditionally they have been able to rely upon an early start and rich extramural

¹ Examples of current shortfalls in language expertise in the USA were recently chronicled in a front-page article in the *New York Times* (Schemo, April 16, 2001).

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exposure to produce competency in, say, English without needing to develop rigorous models of instruction and learning at the highest levels of proficiency (Theo van Els, personal communication, April 19, 2001).

The relative insufficiency of programming experience at the highest levels of proficiency has resulted in a significant dearth of knowledge about learning and teaching at these levels. The current volume begins to fill this void by providing, for the first time, a record of the literature on the subject of learning and teaching at the Superior/Distinguished level in ILR/ACTFL² terms, together with clear examples of best practice of the relatively few efforts in this area.³ Such information is particularly valuable for program managers who are attempting to meet the unprecedented demand for high-level language programming instead of being concerned exclusively with beginning and intermediate levels of instruction, where significant experience and a growing body of research does already exist.

Indeed, researchers in second language acquisition (SLA) have focused mainly on classroom learning and learners at the beginning and intermediate levels and have devoted some attention to somewhat more advanced levels in immersion environments. Such research concentrations are understandable, given the fact that these environments and levels are where the students and the data are. However, the literature on SLA contains very little, if anything, about learners and learning at the highest, Superior/Distinguished level. Experience, though, tells us that, outside of the extraordinary, like the programs described in this volume, the few students who manage to reach true, high-level functional proficiency do so mostly on their own, with relatively little programmatic assistance and usually on the basis of a protracted stay in the country where the target language is spoken. The challenge, then, is to actually build language programs in our schools, colleges, and universities that can be relied upon consistently to produce students with this level of competence, whether the learning is in the classroom, in the study-abroad environment, or in a distributed education mode where learners are responsible for management of their own growing knowledge and proficiency.

Such programming involves unprecedented research and development challenges in learner diagnosis, in specification of learning tasks, in flexible and responsive programming especially for small classes and individual learners, and in assessment of attained competence. The current collection of chapters by authors with actual experience at this level is a necessary first step in providing teachers and program managers with emerging and fundamental information

² The commonly accepted metric in the USA is the Interagency Language Roundtable / American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages standard.

³ In these chapters one can see instances of practice that is capable of such high-level programming, whether in government agencies, in private language instruction providers, in study-abroad programs, or in the extraordinary university language program.

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they need to begin to understand the issues and to design and build such advanced-level programming. This volume also presents to the SLA scholarly community new directions for research aimed at meeting the need for empirical evidence concerning performance at this level and the learning tasks involved to reach it.

In spite of the growing acute need for expertise at the ILR/ACTFL Superior (and even higher) level, most language programs even in US colleges and universities are content to settle for ILR/ACTFL Advanced as a reasonable goal for students in their program. This is not surprising; it is even reasonable, given the fact that most students have had only a year or two of language before they arrive on campus and most will take little, if any, more before they graduate.⁴ Nevertheless, it is time to raise the bar, to aim for higher levels of proficiency among graduates reliant primarily on formal educational systems. Such raised attainment is actually possible even in the USA because of the large numbers of heritage language learners enrolled in these institutions and in their language courses; because of the growing numbers of students with opportunity to study and work abroad; and because of the improvement of language programming particularly at the school level. These factors suggest that programs can in fact plan to build upon the proficiency of entering students and provide them by graduation with truly functional language skills. The current volume can begin to show the way, as well as serve to encourage the belief that the Superior/Distinguished level is attainable and even programmable in a formal educational system.⁵

If this volume indeed provides the information that managers, teachers, and learners need in order to pursue higher levels of language competence, and if it serves as a call to raise the bar in language programs, then it can render a vital service to the language profession, particularly in the USA and other English-speaking countries. I believe it does, and I believe it can.

National Foreign Language Center

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⁴ See the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) and the American Council on Education (ACE) for the latest accounts of language, taking in US schools, colleges, and universities (Wirt [2001]).

⁵ In the USA, the National Security Education Program in collaboration with the National Foreign Language Center has recently launched a national effort to establish a small set of university “flagship” language programs that are capable of graduating students in critical languages at the Superior Level.

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Acknowledgments

Many people have contributed to the editors' ability to present these Superior-Distinguished programs in book form. They include teachers and administrators experienced in developing this level of proficiency who have shared not only information but also ideas with us. They include as well a large number of Level 4 language users, who have shared their learning experiences – challenges as well as successes. Unfortunately, not all to whom we are indebted can be named here.

We can, however, name a few who have helped in exceptional ways. Renée Meyer and James Bernhardt voluntarily read chapter after chapter and provided invaluable feedback both on content and on format. Also, three Cambridge University Press proposal readers gave marvelous suggestions for additions to the book – and we were fortunate enough to be able to follow through on most of these.

We have very much enjoyed working with Kate Brett, our Cambridge University Press editor. She, as much as anyone else, has made this book a reality.

Books would not come into being without significant behind-the-scenes support. Carl Leaver prepared all the graphics, and Fawn Leaver proofread the original manuscript. Many thanks to both of them.

Finally, we must also thank the authors. A number of them read each other's work and provided very helpful commentary. Editors cannot do the job alone, and in this case, the support of the authors was keenly felt and much appreciated.

For our readers who would like to know more about teaching at upper levels of proficiency, we have included information about how to contact the various authors. In addition, readers may interact with others teaching at this level, as well as find additional information, on a web page devoted to advanced SLA: www.mindsolutionsinternational.com.

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