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ABSTRACT

The proficiency movement in second language teaching has had a wide impact because it represents not only an attempt to introduce a national metric but also an attempt to modify the nature of the second language curriculum. The curriculum has been pointed in the direction of instruction in the functional use of language. The list of languages affected by the proficiency movement includes both commonly and less commonly taught languages. This paper suggests that the impact of the proficiency movement will be more difficult to attain in Russian language teaching because the field has not yet moved far enough from the traditional grammar-translation approach. It is noted that the organization of language teaching in America mitigates against the acquisition of usable skills by imposing severe limitations on time allotted to the study of foreign languages as well as by adopting a non-use orientation. A brief history of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) generic guidelines is presented, followed by a description of the Russian proficiency guidelines and a review of proficiency testing. Proficiency is further discussed in terms of the four skills (listening, reading, writing, speaking) and proficiency-based textbooks. Suggestions for improving the instructional system are offered. Contains 18 references. (LB)

The Proficiency Movement: Where Do We Go From Here?

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It would be no exaggeration to say that during the past decade, few areas in the second language teaching profession had not been affected by attempts to introduce a national metric based on demonstrated proficiency in the functional use of a foreign language and to define achievement in second language instruction in terms of functional ability rather than exposure time or control of specific grammatical and/or lexical features. The proficiency movement had such a wide impact because it represented not only an attempt to introduce a national metric but, most importantly, an attempt to modify the nature of the second language curriculum by pointing it in the direction of instruction in functional use of the second language. The list of languages affected by the proficiency movement is quite impressive. It includes the less commonly taught languages (Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic), and the much less uncommonly taught languages (Hindi, Hebrew, Indonesian, Turkish, Swahili, Hausa and Lingala).

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In order to assess the impact of the proficiency movement on the teaching of Russian in the United States, it would be convenient to liken it to glasnost (the professional dialog associated with the proficiency movement as it concerns the teaching and learning of Russian) and perestroika (the actual restructuring of curricula and assessment along functional lines). As is the case in Gorbachev's Russian, glasnost so far has been much more successful than perestroika7

The proficiency movement was introduced into the Russian language teaching field at a historical stage in its development that was radically different from the stage characteristic of the more commonly taught languages. In French and Spanish, and to some extent in German, the dominant grammar-translation approach of the forties was replaced in the fifties by the audiolingual approach with its emphasis on oral practice. Gradual realization of the inadequacies of audiolingualism led to an adoption of other approaches and techniques (Communicative, Total Physical Response, Rassias, Silent Way, Community Counseling-Learning, Suggestopedia, etc.). The proficiency movement was able to capitalize on this eclecticism by suggesting an organizing principle for teaching and testing without dictating any specific approach. In other words, the proficiency movement was reasonably successful in Spanish, French, and German because, quite simply, it was able to use the building blocks that were already there.

The situation in Russian was quite different. By the mid-eighties, the dominant approach to teaching Russian was still grammar-translation. The Russian language teaching field engaged in but the briefest flirtation with audiolingualism with the publication of a purely audiolingual textbook *Modern Russian I, II* by Dawson and Humesky. At that time, most teachers did not know how to use it and the textbook was abandoned in favor of pure grammar-translation or audiolingually flavored grammar-translation textbooks—a situation that largely persists to this day. The problem is that audiolingual and post-audiolingual approaches focused attention on the development of oral-aural skills, whereas grammar-translation did not. It will be much harder for the proficiency movement to have an impact on the teaching of Russian because there is a lot of missing territory between grammar-translation and proficiency-based approaches.

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ACTFL GENERIC GUIDELINES

The surge of interest in second language proficiency assessment followed a long history of activities aimed at assessing second language competence in the U.S. Government, which began in 1956 with the development of the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) Oral Proficiency Rating Scale. In 1973, the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR), a committee comprised of representatives of government agencies and a number of other organizations concerned with second language teaching, testing, and research, assumed primary responsibility for the scale. Drawing on the collective experience of these organizations, the ILR Testing Committee worked on refining the government's definitions of proficiency in the four language skills. These descriptions of skill-levels are known as the ILR scale (Interagency Language Roundtable, 1985).

Interest in the ILR scale emerged in academia in the late 1970s due to dissatisfaction with the *status quo* stemming from a number of factors: a greater awareness on the part of both teachers and students of the latter's lack of language competence, improved opportunities to travel, live, and study abroad, increased familiarity with European functional-notional syllabi, and growth of interest in sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, conversational analysis, and discourse analysis. A reliable and valid standardized assessment instrument was felt to be highly desirable in order to more accurately place students in language courses, to institute proficiency standards for admission and graduating requirements, as well as for teacher certification, Teaching Assistant selection, faculty hiring and job placement.

In 1981, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) initiated activities to extend the language proficiency assessment movement beyond government and into academia. The initial projects involved the development of generic proficiency guidelines as well as language-specific proficiency guidelines for French, German and Spanish, in addition to training individuals to administer and evaluate oral proficiency tests in these languages. The generic set of guidelines, which came to be known as the *ACTFL Guidelines,* was designed to serve the academic learner who differs from the government learner in a number of important ways. The typical learner in the government setting is an adult in an intensive

program who has a utilitarian motive for studying a second language in order to meet job requirements in the target-language country. The academic learner, on the other hand, is an individual usually in the late teens or early twenties, who studies a foreign language for a few years in a non-intensive program as part of a more general education in the humanities. Consequently, the *ACTFL Guidelines* are more sensitive than the ILR scale at the lower levels of the proficiency since they provide three distinctions each at the ILR 0/0+ and 1/1+ levels. At the same time, the *ACTFL Guidelines* are less sensitive to distinctions at the upper levels since they collapse ILR speaking and writing levels 3, 3+, 4, 4+, and 5 under one omnibus designation of Superior.

THE RUSSIAN PROFICIENCY GUIDELINES

In 1983, ACTFL received support from the U.S. Department of Education to create language-specific proficiency statements for Chinese, Japanese and Russian. The availability of government testers to train the initial contingent of academic testers in Russian made it possible for a group of trained individuals to begin work on the Russian Guidelines in 1984.[1]

The adaptation of the generic *ACTFL Guidelines* to Russian was characterized by a conflict between the desire to make the level descriptions come to life through a variety of examples from Russian and the desire to preserve the global character of these descriptions. The process of adaptation was not without some uneasiness caused by the need for inclusion of references to features that are unique to Russian. In the end, the removal of references to specific structures in the revised *ACTFL Guidelines* of 1986 facilitated the subsequent revision of the Russian-specific guidelines because the committee no longer felt constrained by the imposition of developmental hierarchies for grammar features more characteristic of less inflected West European languages.

Although members of the Russian Guidelines committee had all been trained in the administration of the Oral Proficiency Interview and were all experienced teachers of Russian, they were somewhat uneasy about positing a developmental hierarchy of acquisition of grammatical discourse, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic features on the basis of observation and experience rather than pragmatic evidence. It was felt that the availability of large amounts of data from taped oral

interviews in Russian should provide the impetus for psycholinguistic research into characteristics of learner speech at different levels of proficiency, such as suggested by Byrnes (1987). The results of this research were to guide efforts to reexamine and reevaluate some of the statements in the current version of the Russian Guidelines with regard to various aspects of learner performance at different levels of proficiency. The danger of a cyclical effect in using interview data to validate oral proficiency interview traits had to be kept in mind, of course. Unfortunately, this type of research has failed to attract Russian specialists and remains undone.

Over the past several years, a number of researchers have criticized both the *Guidelines* and the OPI procedures. The most significant of these criticisms was that there had not been any validation of either the *Guidelines* or of the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), that the latter does not take into account test method effects and that trait and method are confounded in the design of the *Guidelines* and the OPI (Cachman and Savignon, 1986; Bachman, 1988). To address these concerns, ACTFL conducted an investigation of the construct validity of the *Guidelines* and the OPI procedure in English and French (Dandonoli and Henning, 1990).

The results of the study were quite encouraging since they indicated that with a few exceptions, there was adequate progression in the appropriate direction on the latent ability and difficulty continua associated with the skill-level descriptions provided in the *Guidelines*. In addition, the face validity of the *Guidelines* received support from high correlations that were obtained between oral proficiency ratings assigned by certified OPI testers and ratings assigned by untrained native speakers. In both English and French, all four skills assessed according to the *ACTFL Guidelines*, would be available in the three languages by the time the study got started. Unfortunately, such tests were not available at the time in the three languages for all levels in the four skills, and time and budget considerations did not permit extensive test development in all three languages. Because of available resources, ACTFL selected French and Spanish and dropped Russian. It seems clear that the next logical step would be to seek additional confirmation of the validity of the *Guidelines* for Russian.

To date, few Russian specialists have considered research questions associated with the Oral Proficiency Interview. To name just a few potentially fruitful areas of research: 1) How do various

aspects of declarative knowledge (phonology, morphosyntax, lexicon) and procedural knowledge (communicative strategies) contribute to relative levels of interactive verbal ability? 2) What are the predictive and concurrent validities of the OPI for various types of decision-making? 3) What are the interrater reliabilities among ACTFL-trained testers and between ACTFL- and government-trained testers? 4) What is the convergent validity of tests for the four skills, based on the *ACTFL Guidelines*, in Russian?

PROFICIENCY TESTING

The first OPI workshop in Russian was offered in January 1984. Since that time, a total of 14 OPI Russian workshops have been conducted at various sites around the country attracting a total of 97 participants, 17 of whom have been certified as oral proficiency testers. In addition to tester-training workshops, numerous familiarization workshops have been offered on either an institutional or on a regional basis. It would be safe to say that the percentage of Russian teachers today, who have some familiarity with the Oral Proficiency Interview and the rating scale, is quite substantial.

Although the number of certified testers in Russian is quite small, it is hard to argue for significantly greater numbers because there is a greater need in most programs for functionally-oriented classroom tests of speaking ability than for true proficiency tests. Individuals who are familiar with the Oral Proficiency Interview elicitation techniques and principles of rating, whether certified or not, can be more helpful in designing, administrating, and rating proachievement tests at their institutions than those totally unfamiliar with the OPI. Viewed from this perspective, attendance at an OPI workshop which does not result in certification is still a valuable experience.

The availability of the *Guidelines* and the training of individuals in the administration and scoring of the OPI has not solved all our testing problems. In the first place, the OPI is one measure of only one skill. In the second place, all tests are designed for a certain purpose and for a specific population. The OPI, as any other test, may be valid for some purposes but not for others. Much of the current dissatisfaction with it arises from failure to maintain an awareness of its limitations. The *Guidelines* and the OPI were created to provide a

global sense of speaker performance at various stages of second language acquisition. Hence, the OPI is an extracurricular test which is inadequate for measuring specific outcomes in language courses. The *Guidelines* and the OPI are not only *not* sensitive enough to small increments in learning, but the assessment criteria embodied in them focuses both on what learners *can do* with the language and on what they *cannot yet do* in it.

The availability of a standardized measure of speaking ability that everyone could interpret in a uniform way has helped to draw attention to goals, standards, and accountability in Russian language teaching. It has encouraged teachers, administrators, funding agencies, and publishers to debate goals and criteria for language teaching as well as for materials construction. However, the most obvious contribution of the *Guidelines* and the OPI has been in curbing unrealistic expectations that teachers have for their instruction and that students have for themselves.

The tempting question "Where should my student be at the end of X semesters or years of instruction?" is unanswerable through the *Guidelines* themselves because the criteria embodied in them is extracurricular in nature, and the time required to reach a stated level of proficiency will vary from one individual to another and from instructional setting to instructional setting. This calls for caution in the use of proficiency ratings for placement, entrance, and exit criteria unless they are used in conjunction with other measures of progress, including functional tests based on a specific body of material covered in a stated course or program of instruction. The establishment of minimum standards based on proficiency levels should be done only after careful study of the curriculum, student factors, time constraints and institutional goals. At present, no data exists regarding the number of institutions that use proficiency ratings for placement, entry or exit criteria. This information is currently being collected by the National Foreign Language Center as part of the Russian language survey.

One of the problems with using the OPI as an on-going assessment device is the exponential nature of the rating scale. Although most students make rapid progress through the Novice level, they reach a rather obvious plateau at the Intermediate Level which often extends over several years of non-intensive instruction. Repeated use of the OPI throughout a period corresponding to a flattened acquisition curve may be counterproductive and

disheartening to many students who feel that their hard work produces but meagre results. Yet, a great deal of learning does actually take place during this time—learning which could be easily detected by measures which are sensitive to subtle changes in performance over relatively short periods of study.

Proficiency testing is often done on a one-shot basis with little or no follow-up. When testing large numbers of students the teacher/tester rarely has the opportunity to return to the test and use it for diagnostic purposes—a very time-consuming and labor-intensive procedure, which, in order to be practical, must involve teachers and students working together at the mutual task of diagnosis and repair. Fortunately, the OPI is not the only source of data on oral performance. Such data can be collected through typed reports, discussions, debates, and conversations which students do as part of their homework, as well as recorded conversation samples from paired and small group work. Most importantly, however, the OPI can provide a convenient format for administering speaking tests based on topics and functions specifically covered in a given course.

The OPI may not be practical in many testing situations since it requires a trained tester and must be administered on an individual basis. Semi-direct oral proficiency tests may provide an acceptable substitute in many cases when the OPI is not practical or possible. Research shows that the results obtained by means of semi-direct oral proficiency tests correlate highly with the face-to-face Oral Proficiency Interview (Clark and Li, 1986; Stansfield and Kenyon, 1989). Semi-direct tests offer a number of advantages over the OPI: they can be group administered anywhere since a trained interviewer is not required; institutional versions of semi-direct tests may be developed to help standardize assessment of oral skills in courses with multiple sections; it is easier to train teachers or teaching assistants to score speech samples elicited in a highly standardized way by a semi-direct test than to teach them how to elicit speech samples in a reliably uniform way.

The ETS Comprehensive Russian Proficiency Test (for ACTFL levels Novice through Intermediate High), which has become available to schools and colleges in the Fall of 1990, includes a semi-direct test of speaking ability which will have to be scored by individual institutions. An experimental scoring of the speaking and writing portions of the test held at Bryn Mawr College with the 1989 NEH Institute participants, who were generally familiar with the

ACTFL scale, proved that after a brief training session, teachers were able to reliably score speech samples using the ACTFL scale. Semi-direct speaking tests are particularly appropriate for Slavic languages, other than Russian, for which ACTFL-trained interviewers are not available. Considering the fast pace of events in Eastern Europe, the development of semi-direct tests of oral skills for these languages should be a high priority for the 1990s.

PROFICIENCY AND THE FOUR SKILLS

In the public imagination, the concept of proficiency has been largely coupled with speaking skills as a result of a 30-year tradition. But oral skills are only one communicative modality because language proficiency can only be defined with reference to a particular skill, and proficiency in one modality does not fully guarantee equal proficiency in another. It is well known that language learners are generally able to understand more than they can produce. For instance, learners of Spanish and French in a government school showed higher scores in listening than in speaking (Lowe, 1985). This discrepancy was strongest at the more advanced levels and practically nonexistent at the lower ones, and greater in Spanish than in French. It is quite possible that a "comprehension advantage" is even smaller in Russian because of lesser numbers of readily recognizable cognates as well as lack of readily transferable background knowledge.

The receptive skills too may develop each at its own pace. For instance, the norming of the *ETS Advanced Russian Listening/Reading Test* showed that among 500 participating students, who had at least three years of college-level Russian, the level of proficiency in listening was generally lower than that in reading. Table 1 below shows the percentage of students who achieved ACTFL Advanced level or higher in listening and reading after three, four, and five years of study.

Table 1

Percent of learners who scored above ACTFL Advanced on the ETS Advanced Russian Listening/Reading Test

Years of Study	Listening	Reading
3	4	16
4	22	50
5	33	74

Differences in the development of listening and reading skills are also evident in the raw scores obtained during the field testing of the Listening and Reading sections of the *ETS Comprehensive Russian Proficiency Test.* For instance, after four years of study, 31% of the college test takers (N=197) achieved the Advanced level in listening as compared to 55% in reading. The difference was far smaller among the high school test takers due to a ceiling effect (8% in listening, 12% in reading).

Acknowledgement of the separability of the four modalities implies the need to examine goals and objectives for each one. Although in theory, most existing Russian textbooks profess a four-skills approach, in practice, however, the four skills are often a mere pretext for presenting and practicing grammar. To quote Galloway (1987): "A far too real scenario is evoked by the student who rises from the ranks of basal-level instruction, steps fitfully across the bridge of the conversation and/or composition course, and enters the 'upper division'—a place where one reads literature whether or not one has learned to read." One of the strongest implications of a proficiency-based approach to foreign language instruction is the gearing of classroom activities to the development of specific usable skills in the four modalities in a manner that reflects their domain. A modality-specific approach to teaching calls for a modality-specific testing program which makes it unacceptable to assess general language ability through a pencil-and-paper test of grammar and vocabulary.

PROFICIENCY-BASED TEXTBOOKS

Since 1986, a number of Russian instructional workshops have been offered by individual schools, colleges and universities, local departments of education and professional organizations. In addition, a 5-week summer workshop at Middlebury College in 1988, and three consecutive summer NEH-funded Institutes (1987-89), three ACTR-Ford Institutes (1990-1993) have given many Russian teachers an opportunity to critically examine the assumptions underlying a variety of popular foreign language methodologies and approaches as well as a chance to enrich and replenish their repertoire of classroom techniques for teaching usable skills in the four modalities.

When these enthusiastic and dedicated language teachers return to their classrooms determined to make changes, they face the formidable task of creating new materials to supplement or replace their woefully outdated textbooks. With many other conflicting pressures competing for their time even the most determined teachers will be unable to sustain their enthusiasm for change for too long. The impact of instructional workshops and institutes will be short-lived unless a major effort is made to develop instructional materials supportive of a communicative approach to teaching Russian. This effort is under way with the on-going development of the high school series *Лицом к лицу* (*Face to Face*).

There is little doubt that the proficiency movement had a significant impact on the textbook development effort in the commonly taught languages. The past three years saw the publication of a substantial number of communicatively-based textbooks in Spanish, French and German. These textbooks are usually accompanied by workbooks which, in addition to skill-getting activities (various types of grammatical and lexical drills and exercises) contain a rich selection of meaningful, contextualized, task-based skill-using activities aimed at the development of usable skills in the four modalities. Laboratory tapes include not only substitution drills, but listening comprehension exercises using authentic or semi-authentic listening passages. Reading is practiced not only as a support skill, but as a skill in its own right using information-gathering techniques and authentic passages at appropriate difficulty levels. Teachers' manuals include sample lesson plans, as well as a variety of ideas for additional skill-using activities. A teacher of Russian, who examines textbooks in the commonly taught languages at book exhibits during the ACTFL or the Northeast Conference, knows exactly how Gorbachev felt during a visit to the silicone valley of California or how Soviet agricultural experts feel when they visit a farm in the American Midwest. Thus, the highest priority for the 1990s is the development of comprehensive high school and college textbooks and ancillary materials to support a functional curriculum for beginning, intermediate and advanced levels of instruction.

A LOOK INTO THE FUTURE

It is too early to predict whether the proficiency movement will bring about a significant change in the teaching of Russian in the United States. So far, it has provided a much needed impetus for reexamining instructional goals, practices and materials. This is a step in the right direction. However, proficiency-oriented teaching and testing are only links in the overall instructional chain. There are many dedicated and effective teachers whose efforts are frustrated by the organization of foreign language instruction that limits their effectiveness. Therefore, the development and implementation of more contemporary communicatively-based materials and methodologies will have an impact only in conjunction with an overall reappraisal of language instruction, i.e. with nothing short of perestroika of the entire language curriculum.

In our formal educational system, language learning is not related to functional language use later in life even though some instructors do teach usable skills and some students do actually acquire them. Instead, foreign language instruction is viewed as a means for developing an understanding of other countries and their cultures, or simply as just another way of teaching humanities. Such diffuse goals make it difficult, if not totally impossible, to design and implement functionally-oriented language programs.

Reaching a usable level of skill in a foreign language requires a long-term effort. Yet the severe limitations on time allotted for language study within the formal educational system mitigate against the acquisition of language skills that could be professionally applied upon graduation. In fact, learners rarely stick with a foreign language long enough to acquire even the most minimal functional ability in it. Enrollment statistics speak for themselves. Only about 60% of high school students go on to the second level in French, Spanish or German, and only 21% go on to the third level (Fetters and Owings, 1984). The situation is hardly better on college campuses, where only about 50% of the students take any foreign language with only 30% of them taking the equivalent of two years of a foreign language and only 15% enrolled in upper division language classes (Lambert, 1989).

Further attrition is caused by discontinuities between high school and college instruction: students are often excused from taking language courses in college instead of being encouraged to build on

previous training. Lambert (1989) reports, for instance, that only 68% of 400 universities and 40% of colleges covered in his national survey have a language requirement for some students. The MLA survey of 1989 shows that only 25.8% of colleges and universities surveyed had an entrance requirement in 1987-88 (as opposed to 33.6% in 1965-66 and 14.1% in 1982-83). Only 58.1% of these institutions had an exit requirement (as opposed to 88.9% in 1965-66 and 47.4% in 1982-83).

Higgs (1985) calculated that the total amount of language exposure given to college foreign language majors is an equivalent of one month of exposure to the language in a natural setting. The amount of proficiency that can be expected under these time constraints is clearly minimal. The results of Carroll's (1967) study are confirmed by more recent data from pre-program OPI testing by ACTR [*Editor's note: see article by Brecht, Davidson and Ginsberg elsewhere in this collection*] which indicates that the great majority of students, who had an equivalent of three years of college Russian, rarely demonstrate speaking ability above the ACTFL intermediate range.

Thus the formal educational system is characterized by predominance of low-level students enrolled in programs with non-use oriented goals. Add to it the unrealistic expectation for linguistic miracles on the part of students, parents, administrators, and professors in upper division literature courses, who expect students to become fluent speakers and readers after only two years of non-intensive language study. This will continue to make the job of foreign language teachers, no matter how effective and dedicated, extremely difficult even if they embrace a proficiency-based approach. Therefore, one should not expect the proficiency movement to be yet another cure-all for the low attainments of our foreign language students. A host of measures, some more methodologically-based, others more nearly policy-based, will have to be put into effect if the proficiency movement is to bring about a true perestroika.

Suggestions for such measures include:

1. Increased language exposure at both high school and c llege levels that include longer and more intensive contact with the language. This calls for longer instructional sequences and for better coordination between high schools and colleges, as well as between institutions of higher learning and the government/private sector.

2. Replication in the classroom of those features of natural settings that promote and enhance language acquisition, utilizing materials and techniques that stress functional use of language in the four skills.

3. Additional secondary level programs that would include foreign language camps, weekend retreats, and intensive summer study in magnet schools.

4. Well-organized study-abroad programs for high school and college students that focus on increasing language proficiency and which are integrated with domestic training. This calls on institutions to make provision for students returning from abroad to use their increased language skills.

5. Training of top quality teachers and foreign language researchers to meet Russian language needs. This requires increased opportunities to study in the USSR as well as a restructuring of some Russian graduate programs to include a second language acquisition/second language education option in addition to literature and linguistics.

6. Development of textbooks, authentic reading and listening materials, and of a rich variety of ancillary materials to support functionally-directed instruction at all levels of ability.

Summary

This paper examined proficiency-related developments in the teaching and testing of Russian during the decade of the eighties. It was suggested that the organization of language teaching in America mitigates against the acquisition of usable skills by imposing severe limitations on time allotted to the study of foreign languages as well as by adopting a non-use orientation. As a result, the introduction of proficiency concepts into Russian language teaching and testing can have an impact only on how time is spent in the classroom but cannot solve the problem of insufficient time.

[1] The Russian Guidelines Committee was composed of Thomas Beyer (Middlebury College), Dan Davidson (Bryn Mawr College), Irene Thompson (The George Washington University), Gerald Ervin (The Ohio State University) and Donald Jarvis (Brigham Young University). The revision Committee had two members, Thomas Beyer and Irene Thompson.

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