



TEAL MANITOBA JOURNAL
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TEAL MANITOBA ARTICLE SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

TEAL Manitoba Article Submission Guidelines

TEAL Manitoba Journal welcomes submissions from teachers, students, academics, and anyone interested in the field of teaching English as an additional language. There are three regular sections in the journal:

Features: These articles can be theoretical or practical. The range of articles in this section includes: classroom-based activities, methods, strategies, workshop presentations, theoretical and/or academic perspectives, and issues in the TEAL/TESL profession. Articles may include example worksheets, and all articles must include a reference list of materials consulted and quoted when writing the article.

Reviews: Reviews of teaching materials and resources are written by practicing teachers and instructors. In addition, we publish reviews of fiction and nonfiction books, websites, articles, movies or anything related to EAL, newcomers and international cultures and issues. A bibliographic reference of the resource being reviewed must be included with the review.

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The editors make final publication decisions, but they regularly seek advice from the TEAL Manitoba Executive at its monthly meetings. If you wish to collaborate in the editing of your submission, please let the editor know. We appreciate your input and assistance.

Contact: Kevin Carter at khsuz@hotmail.com

Eunhee Buettner at tgilj1980@gmail.com

EDITORS

KEVIN CARTER

EUNHEE BUETTNER

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Teachers of English as an Additional Language

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APPLYING THE “10,000-HOUR RULE” TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING: OR, WHY INFORMAL LEARNING IS ESSENTIAL FOR ACHIEVING LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

ABSTRACT

Adult learners of English as an Additional Language (EAL) in Canada do not receive sufficient instruction through classes alone to achieve distinguished levels of proficiency or develop high levels of expertise. This article will explore what is meant by proficiency and look at language learning in terms of the model that has commonly become known as “the 10,000 hour rule” of expertise. This paper attempts to answer the question, what would it take for an EAL learner in Canada to achieve the 10,000 hours necessary to achieve high levels of expertise in language proficiency? Three adult EAL programs in Winnipeg are considered for the number of instructional hours that they offer, and how informal learning is necessary to supplement classroom instruction in order to achieve 10,000 hours of dedicated practice necessary to develop expertise. Recommendations are offered to help educators and learners understand the important role of self-regulated, informal learning in achieving language proficiency.

Keywords: English as an Additional Language, EAL, Canada, Winnipeg, 10-hour rule, expertise, proficiency, ACTFL, expert, self-regulation, formal learning, non-formal learning, informal learning.

Note: This paper was presented as the keynote address at the 2012 TEAM Conference held on May 18, 2012 in Winnipeg.

Adult learners of English as an Additional Language (EAL) in Canada do not receive sufficient instruction through classes alone to achieve distinguished levels of proficiency or develop high levels of expertise. This article will explore what is meant by proficiency

and proposes a correlation between the highest levels of proficiency and expertise as defined by researchers such as Ericsson et al. (1993 and 2007). The article adopts as a model, what has commonly become known as “the 10,000 hour rule” of expertise. Further, the paper addresses the need to incorporate dedicated practice and self-regulated informal learning as critical components of developing language proficiency.

What do we mean when we talk about proficiency?

A single definition of proficiency that is accepted by practitioners and scholars alike has yet to be found. The search for adequate measures of proficiency dates back to the 1950s (Sparks et al., 1997). TESL Canada notes that currently in Canada, no less than eleven language proficiency tests are used across the country, including the Cambridge Certificate of Advanced English (CAE), the Canadian Academic English Language Assessment (CAEL), Canadian Test of English for Scholars and Trainees (CanTEST), Canadian Language Benchmark Assessment for Nurses (CELBAN), Canadian Language Benchmark Assessment (CLBA), Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE), International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Michigan English Language Assessment Battery (MELAB), Test of English as a Foreign Language -Internet-based Test (TOEFL IBT), Test of English as a Foreign Language- Paper-based Test (TOEFL PBT) and the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). Each test measures proficiency differently and serves a different context and purpose.

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages defines proficiency as “what an individual can and

cannot do with language at each level, regardless of where, when, or how the language was acquired” (ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, 2012, p.3).

The ACTFL Guidelines are comprised of five proficiency levels: Distinguished, Superior, Advanced, Intermediate and Novice, across the four skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. The Distinguished level of proficiency is the highest a learner can achieve in any skill. Though distinguished proficiency is described differently for each skill level, across the board it is characterized by very low occurrences of errors, the ability to process and synthesize complex information effectively and quickly, high levels of control and mastery, superior problem-solving abilities and highly sophisticated performance.

There are numerous factors that affect the achievement of proficiency. These include the learner’s cognitive abilities, natural talent, aptitude, genetics, environment, and the amount of time a person spends learning the language (Archibald et al., 2007; Mercer, 2012; Winnipeg English Language Assessment and Referral Centre, n.d.). This work examines one of these factors, the amount of time invested in learning the language.

Proficiency, Expertise and the “10,000-Hour Rule”

The characteristics described by ACTFL of a learner who has achieved a distinguished level of proficiency is not unlike the definitions other scholars use to describe an expert:

“People who have developed expertise in particular areas are, by definition, able to think effectively about problems in those areas.... experts have acquired extensive knowledge that affects what they notice and how they organize, represent, and interpret information in their environment. This, in turn, affects their abilities to remember, reason,

and solve problems” (Bransford et al., 1999, p. 31).

Ericsson et al. note that the development of expertise is closely related to the amount of time a person spends developing his or her skills (1993, 2007). To be precise, 10,000 hours of deliberate learning and practice have been found to be the length of time necessary to develop high levels of expertise. While Ericsson et al. specifically studied the development of world-class expertise, others have expanded upon their original notion by

applying the model to what is necessary to achieve high levels of proficiency in any given skill area (Prensky, 2001, McGonigal, 2010), including language learning (Eaton, 2011, Mercer, 2012). The notion was dubbed “the 10,000-hour rule” by Gladwell (2008).

The 10,000-Hour Rule Applied to Language Learning

While there is some evidence to suggest that the amount of time a learner dedicates to their language studies can impact the levels of proficiency they

can achieve, determining the amount of hours a learner spends trying to achieve proficiency is difficult to track. The activities associated with language learning will often include formal, non-formal and informal learning activities (Eaton, 2010). For example, formal courses, non-formal continuing or adult education classes and informal conversation or tutoring are all common activities in which a language learner may engage.

Other Canadian researchers have determined that classroom instruction

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alone is insufficient for students to achieve functional bilingualism. For example, Archibald et al. determined that students in Alberta who take second language classes in school are unlikely to develop proficiency, “Learning a second language for 95 hours per year for six years will not lead to functional bilingualism and fluency in the second language. Expectations must be realistic.” (2006, p. 3).

It should be noted that Archibald et al. were not addressing EAL specifically, but rather second language classes in the Alberta K-12 context in general. Their conclusions, however, echo what other researchers have found in terms of the number of hours needed to develop expertise (Ericsson et al, 1993; Prensky, 2001; Gladwell, 2008; McGonigal, 2010; Eaton, 2011; Mercer, 2012).

While Archibald et al. were able to examine the Alberta program of studies for second languages and were able to draw their conclusions based on their examination of those documents, determining the number of hours that adult ESL learners spend in classes is more difficult to determine. While the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program runs nation-wide across Canada and designed to provide language instruction to new immigrants, there is no indication on the government website as to how many hours may be required for each level (Government of Canada, n.d.).

What would it take for an adult English as an Additional Language (EAL) learner in Canada to achieve the 10,000 hours necessary to achieve high levels of expertise in language proficiency? There is no clear or easy answer, but the following examples may provide some insight.

Examples from Winnipeg – Insufficient class time

Examining the situation of the language classes available for adult EAL learners in one Canadian city provides a snapshot of the situation. Immigrate Manitoba provides examples of adult EAL classes for adults and their time allocation:

Example #1: Winnipeg Technical College, Evening Program

In this program, classes run for 2.5 hours per night, Monday to Thursday (Immigrate Manitoba, 2012). So, students receive a maximum of 10 hours of instruction per week. Assuming the same model as above, using a maximum of 50 weeks per year (allowing for statutory holidays and other days off), then learners would access a maximum of 500 hours of EAL instruction per year.

If we apply the “10,000-hour rule” model, we can ask how long it would take for learners in this program to achieve proficiency if this class was their only means to learn English; the answer is achieved by dividing 10,000 hours by 500 hours of instruction per year. A learner would require 20 years of continuous classes in order to achieve expert levels of proficiency.

Example #2: Winnipeg School Division Adult EAL Centre Day Part-Time Program

In this program, classes run for 3 hours per day, Monday to Friday (Immigrate Manitoba, 2012). Three hours of classes per day over five days means 15 hours per week. There are no details given about the number of weeks offered per year. If we assume 50 weeks per year (allowing for statutory holidays and other days off), this translates into a maximum of 750 hours of EAL course hours per year.

If we apply the 10,000-hour rule, learners in this program would need to attend classes for 13.3 years in order to achieve expert levels of proficiency.

Example #3: Red River College Language Training Centre

This is noted as an “Intensive English Program”, and classes run from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., Monday to Friday (Immigrate Manitoba, 2012). Though it was not specified in the program information, if we assume a one-hour lunch break, then students would receive five hours of instruction per day, or 25 hours per week. Assuming 50 weeks of classes per year, a learner would receive 1250 hours of

instruction per year. Learners in this program would require only eight years to achieve expert levels of proficiency, if we apply the “10,000-hour rule”.

Examining the development of language proficiency in this manner may be somewhat simplistic. It is important to reiterate that at the beginning of this article it was stated that a number of factors affect a learner’s ability to become proficient in a language. These examples are not provided as contractions to that notion. Nor is the implication that the number of class hours is the only factor to consider when we ask how long it may take a learner to achieve high levels of expertise in the language, or what ACTFL defines as a Distinguished level of proficiency. These examples are offered simply to illustrate that adult learners in Winnipeg are unlikely to achieve English language proficiency by only attending classes.

Solution: Deliberate practice through self-regulated informal learning

Scholars and others are very clear that deliberate practice is necessary to achieve high levels of expertise (Ericsson et al, 1993; Prensky, 2001; Gladwell, 2008; McGonigal, 2010; Eaton, 2011; Mercer, 2012.) Ericsson et al. define deliberate practice as “considerable, specific, and sustained efforts to do something you can’t do well” (2007, p. 118).

Deliberate practice for acquiring language proficiency means engaging in informal learning outside of classes. Informal learning is less structured and less organized and often has no particular learning objectives. (Organization of Economic Development and Cooperation, n.d.; Werquin, 2007; Eaton, 2010.). Though there are differing opinions on whether informal learning is intentional (Werquin, 2007), it can be defined as “any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs without the presence of externally imposed curricular criteria” (Livingstone, p. 4). According to Livingstone, informal learning includes self-directed learning or what Ericsson et al. refer to as “deliberate

practice” (1993 and 2007).

Examples of this type of deliberate, but informal language learning include self-study; homework; active participation in conversation clubs; tutoring from volunteers or friends; a trip to the grocery store with a native speaker with the objective of learning the names of food items; watching television or movies with a particular focus on using the medium to learn the language; listening to music with lyrics in English while making a deliberate attempt to learn, understand and correctly pronounce the lyrics or picking up a newspaper with the intention of trying to read and understand the stories. These are only a few examples; there are many more. What the examples share in common is the learner’s deliberate focus on improving his or her language skills as they engage in the activity.

Ericsson et al. note that “the maximal level of performance for individuals in a given domain is not attained automatically as a function of extended experience” (Ericsson et al., 1993, p. 366). Zimmerman points out that learners must go beyond developing self-awareness to develop self-regulation, and that this “involves an underlying sense of self-efficacy and personal agency and the motivational and behavioral processes to put these self-beliefs into effect” (1993, p. 217).

Reconceptualization of language learning in Manitoba

Let us reconsider the examples above, adding deliberate, self-regulated informal learning into each of them. For the sake of argument, let us assume that in addition to the number of class hours, as they have been roughly calculated above, that learners also engage in two hours per day, every day of deliberate informal practice. This would increase their intentional learning by 14 hours per week. How long would it take them to achieve the 10,000 hours necessary to develop an expert level of proficiency?

Example #1: Winnipeg Technical College, Evening Program

Classes run for 2.5 hours per night, Monday to Thursday (Immigrate Mani-

toba, 2012), which equals 10 hours of classes per week or 500 hours per year. 10,000 hours of learning = 20 years.

If we add in 2 hours per day (14 hours per week) of intentional, self-regulated informal learning, then the total number of deliberate learning hours per week increases from 10 to 24. Over 50 weeks this adds up to 1200 hours per year. The total time required to achieve 10,000 hours of dedicated learning decreases from 20 years to 8.33.

In this scenario, a learner is still unlikely to achieve expert levels of proficiency quickly, but as Ericsson et al. point out, it is not uncommon for an individual to invest ten years of dedicated study or practice in order to achieve high levels of expertise (1993, 2007). For a learner who can only attend part-time evening classes, he or she can achieve high levels of proficiency in half the time, by taking the initiative to include regular, dedicated and self-regulated informal learning.

Example #2: Winnipeg School Division Adult EAL Centre Day Part-Time Program

Classes run for 3 hours per day, Monday to Friday (Immigrate Manitoba, 2012), which equals 15 hours per week or 750 hours per year. 10,000 hour of learning = 13.3 years. If we add in 2 hours per day (14 hours per week) of intentional, self-regulated informal learning, then the dedicated learning time per week almost doubles, increasing from 15 hours per week to 29. Over a 50-week year, this means an increase from 750 hours to 1450 hours. 10,000 hours of dedicated learning would no longer take 13.3 years, but rather only 6.9 years.

Example #3: Red River College Language Training Centre

Classes run from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., Monday to Friday (Immigrate Manitoba, 2012), which was previously estimated to be 25 hours per week, or 1250 hours of instruction per year. 10,000 hours of learning = 8 years.

If we add in 2 hours per day (14 hours per week) of intentional, self-regulated

informal learning the total learning time per week increases from 25 to 39. Over a 50-week year, the total learning time would increase from 1250 hours to 1950, shaving 3 years off the time necessary to reach 10,000 hours required to develop high levels of expertise, bringing the total time down to approximately five years.

CONCLUSIONS

These numbers may appear depressing for the language learner who subscribes to the notion that a language may be learned quickly. Basic competence could surely be achieved in far fewer hours than I have proposed here. It is worth reiterating that according to the ACTFL model mentioned earlier, there are five levels of competence across four skills. This study does not concern itself with the amount of time required to develop Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, or even Superior levels of proficiency, as described by ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2012). Rather, I am concerned with the amount of time required for a learner to develop high levels of expertise, which might arguably correlate to ACTFL’s Distinguished level of proficiency. This means developing the highest levels of fluency of English across all four skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) not simply conversational skills or a working knowledge of the language.

Let us return to the question asked at the beginning. What would it take for an adult ESL learner in Canada to achieve 10,000 hours of dedicated learning in order to achieve what Ericsson et al. (1993, 2007), among others (Prensky, 2001; Gladwell, 2008; McGonigal, 2010; Eaton, 2011; Mercer, 2012) consider to be the “the magic number” to achieve expertise?

The answer may well lie in informal learning. A critical component to achieving such a high number of hours is self-regulated and dedicated practice in the form of informal learning. Mercer (2012) notes that, “a personal willingness to invest time and effort and engage in repeated practice” is nec-

essary in order to achieve proficiency. Learners must understand that no amount of class time will ensure they achieve distinguished levels of language competence. In order for a language learner to achieve 10,000 hours of deliberate practice he or she must not rely on classes alone to achieve proficiency. Intentional self-directed study and informal learning are critical to getting sufficient practice in order to gain proficiency.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Explain the concept of self-regulated to EAL learners. Mercer (2012) notes that learners who develop the mindset that they are capable of developing proficiency are more likely to become proficient. Point out that personal agency and self-efficacy are critical to becoming a self-regulated learner (Zimmerman, 1995).
2. Share the “10,000-hour rule” with EAL learners. Engage learners in conversations about how long it takes to develop high levels of proficiency in a language. Explain that the model extends beyond language learning. Help learners develop realistic expectations about the investment of time needed to develop deep levels of proficiency. (Chapter two of Gladwell’s 2008 book, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, makes for an excellent reading assignment for advanced EAL learners.)
3. List the precise number of hours offered per course in publicly accessible documentation and promotional materials for courses. EAL program administrators should include the number of instructional hours in their course descriptions in order for learners to be able to determine how many hours they are investing per week in formal and non-formal classes offered by institutions.
4. Explicitly state how many hours of informal learning (including homework) are expected of learners enrolled in courses. Instead of merely pointing out that practice is helpful, develop specific expectations around how many hours per day or per week that you expect your learners to engage in

intentional informal learning and self-study. Point out how much faster they are likely to gain proficiency.

5. Make it clear to learners that they are unlikely to develop high levels of proficiency through classes alone. Help learners understand that regular, dedicated practice through informal learning is a critical component to achieving proficiency. Make it clear that learners must not rely solely on classes. Help learners to develop a long-term personalized language-learning plan that includes formal, non-formal and dedicated informal learning.

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