Program design in foreign languages has recently become a critical issue for the profession as a whole. Largely as a result of outside influences, including public policy pressures and an explosion of information from diverse fields of investigation, basic questions have emerged as to goals, content, teaching and learning strategies, and evaluation procedures.

Until recently, language teachers operated within a relatively well-defined set of principles and conventions. From colonial times, only the "best" students studied languages, and teachers were equipped to follow the practices of intensive grammar analysis laid down by their predecessors. Even with the emergence of the "scientific" audio-lingual method in the 1950s and 1960s, the curriculum was handed down from above by a cadre of experts who designed the textbooks and teacher training manuals detailing the procedures to follow in teaching lockstep dialogues and pattern drills. Unfortunately, this movement failed to fulfill its promise that students would learn to speak like native speakers.

During the 1960s and 1970s language enrollments dropped to an all-time low (to 15 percent by 1980) and researchers and professional leaders groped for the answers to questions of how to attract and retain students and meet their needs. With a new demand for demonstrable results, and with the entire program no longer prepackaged for teachers, the need for planning became evident. A systems approach was widely adopted, by which goals were set and then subdivided into performance objectives. Teachers and textbooks adopted eclectic procedures, mainly aimed at grammatical analysis, with some superimposition of cultural information and speaking practice.

New fields of study emerged—sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, semantics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, speech act theory, intercultural communication, cognitive and humanistic psychology, and bilingual education—that challenged previously-held ideas and contributed new information about the nature of language, language use for communication, and language learning.

At the same time, numerous reports of special commissions and task forces have called for increased foreign language study leading to functional proficiency for professional and technical fields, as well as the acquisition of knowledge about other cultures and values and the expansion of Americans' vision and understanding of the world. Unfortunately, these pressures are coupled with Americans' expectation that languages, like most other things in life, should be acquired quickly and easily; the great majority of students cease language study after one or two years. Curriculum designers face the challenge of specifying essential but realistic outcomes for a variety of student needs and interests and devising the most effective and efficient means to reach them.

This article examines the complexities of specifying the outcomes and selecting and sequencing the content, outlines the principal program types in
existence today, and offers a general proposal for future programs.

Goals

In addition to the goal of learning the language itself, several goals compete for attention. “Culture,” probably the most difficult to articulate, define, and achieve, is treated elsewhere in this issue. Another principal benefit of studying a foreign language should be that the learner gains an understanding of human language in general and how it works, as well as effective learning strategies, both of which aid in subsequent language learning. Although any language study experience contributes to this learning, specific materials and exercises can be provided to point out to learners the ways in which languages are constructed and used, and to guide them in the conscious development of the most effective strategies for learning.

Proponents of humanistic (“confluent”) education suggest that course content should consist of the individual’s feelings, values, concerns, dreams, and so forth, to be shared in interaction with others in the target language, thus facilitating the personal development of students. “Humanistic” also refers, of course, to art, music, and especially literature, which have traditionally been assumed to occupy a central place in language education.

The most obvious desired outcome of foreign language study, however, is the ability to communicate in the language. Traditionally, language courses have stressed the learning of grammar, presenting each grammar point separately and sequentially. The primary exceptions to this pattern were situation-oriented programs, which presented dialogues and useful phrases for travelers and workers who needed to be able to function in specific settings, e.g., post office, restaurant, bank. The language acquired by means of these lessons seldom is transferable to other settings; learners acquire set phrases but do not develop a general ability to communicate in other situations.

Communicative Competence

Although communication has long been claimed as a major goal of language study, it has often been ignored in practice or equated with the mechanical aspects of the speaking skill. In the 1970s, however, attention shifted to “communicative competence,” a term coined by sociolinguist Hymes (1972) to represent one’s ability to control social and cultural conventions as well as purely linguistic elements in creating utterances for communicative interaction.

Much energy has been devoted to defining the concept in operational terms for pedagogical purposes. The first effort took the form of appending interactive activities to regular class plans, often not clearly related to the core grammatical material.

At the same time, language acquisition research indicated that first languages are acquired through language use rather than linguistic analysis, and this awareness led to the suggestion that grammar and the mechanical control of a language should receive much less attention. Within the proponents of the goal of communication, in fact, are two major camps: those who reject the study of grammar in favor of procedures leading to a “natural order” of acquisition; and those who express the concern that without attention to grammar, adults’ “interlanguage” (non-native learner language) will “fossilize” at some point in their acquisition, thus creating a barrier to progress toward higher levels of proficiency. Both sides claim a basis in research and theory.4

Functions and Notions

The examination of communicative competence and speech acts has led some Europeans and Americans to the “functional-notional approach to syllabus design,” which outlines what people do with language and the meanings that are expressed through forms and seeks to specify goals in terms of these functions and meanings,6 out of which emerge vocabulary, grammar, and appropriate sociolinguistic behavior as necessary tools.

A functional-notional approach begins by assessing learners’ communicative needs. This may be done intuitively, based on experience, and/or by means of questionnaires, interviews, and participant-observation procedures. Functional needs are most readily specifiable for courses and programs for clients with special purposes, such as Spanish for medical personnel or French for business people. However, a sophisticated needs assessment, even for these courses, is a complex operation that results in inventories of functions, grouped and described according to settings, purposes, the role relationships of the interlocutors, their attitudes, and the necessary linguistic and behavioral elements, all of which are then tied together by unifying topics or themes. An example of a topic might be “Finding Your Way in a City,” for which one function would be asking a stranger for help—using polite address, expressions such as “Can you tell
me...?" grammatical structures such as "Where is...?" and prepositions and adverbs of location.

For general academic courses, a needs analysis is less clear-cut. What, indeed, will be the future uses of a language for a majority of students? Some will travel or even live and work in a country where the language is spoken; others will need a knowledge of how languages work and strategies for learning another language more quickly. Many Spanish students, especially, can expect to use the language with native speakers in the United States. Whatever the needs, national polls of adults and students indicate that they want to learn to communicate, above all else.

In its purest form, a language program founded on functional-notional principles would consist of sequenced sets of oral and written functions, beginning with those most needed for survival and culminating in a proficiency level sufficient for the learner to communicate successfully, but not natively or near-natively, in most situations requiring the non-technical use of language. This level has been termed the "threshold level" in Europe (van Ek & Alexander, 1977), and inventories of functions, notions, and their linguistic exponents have been produced for some of the western world's most commonly-taught languages. Using these generic inventories, a curriculum might be designed to meet the needs of any given group of students, taking into consideration local needs and resources.

The major problem with a purely functional approach is that in sequencing the functions in an organized manner, one leaves grammatical structures unsequenced, which would seem inadvisable in the light of both cognitive learning psychology and research that indicates the existence of a natural order of acquisition of language structures. The alternative is to unite the sequencing of functions to that of grammar, but unfortunately, there is no one-to-one relationship between form and function; to get someone to do something, for example, command forms may not be necessary or even appropriate in a given situation. Hints might be more effective, or even gestures, with no verbal expression at all.

Systems are evolving for dealing with these problems. A key principle in the process is the spiraling of material. Grammatical forms and communicative functions are presented and practiced in simple ways for beginners at the survival level and re-entered in increasingly complex and varied form as learners progress to higher levels. Furthermore, what is presented as purely receptive material in early lessons, to be recognized by students when they hear or see it, may reappear later as productive material, to be used in students' speaking or writing.

**Proficiency**

For organizations whose personnel need to communicate in other tongues, the development of functional proficiency has long been of concern. Government agencies such as the Foreign Service Institute, the Defense Language Institute, and the Central Intelligence Agency have worked for decades to identify and describe levels of proficiency and devise measurement criteria and procedures. Recently, in conjunction with the push for communication in language classrooms, the academic community has turned to these agencies for information and guidance in applying the knowledge gained from their experience to the needs of learners in schools and universities.

According to the government's experience in testing with oral interviews, proficiency levels can be described in terms of functions, content/context, and accuracy, thus uniting language and functions. For these highly intensive programs, six levels have been identified, ranging from no communication at all (a rating of S-0) to the proficiency of a well-educated native speaker (S-5). The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and the Educational Testing Service have created four more descriptions for the lower end of the scale, to discriminate among the levels of beginners in academic programs. The government's "0" level has been subdivided into novice low, mid, and high ratings, and the "1" rating has been divided into intermediate low, mid, and high. The following paragraph describes a learner's proficiency at the intermediate low level:

Able to handle successfully a limited number of interactive, task-oriented and social situations. Can ask and answer questions, initiate and respond to simple statements, and maintain face-to-face conversation, although in a highly restricted manner and with much linguistic inaccuracy. Within these limitations, can perform such tasks as introducing self, ordering a meal, asking directions, and making purchases. Vocabulary is adequate to express only the most elementary needs. Strong interference from native language may occur. Misunderstandings frequently arise, but with repetition, this speaker can generally be understood by sympathetic interlocutors.
ACTFL emphasizes that these level descriptions are not goals in themselves but realistic descriptions that serve as a basis for continual research as well as interim guidelines for course and program development.

Currently, proficiency level descriptions are being developed for listening, speaking, reading, and writing in many different languages, beginning with French, German, and Spanish. Dozens of faculty members are being trained nationwide in the procedures of conducting and rating oral interviews, which can be used in placing students in courses, diagnosing needs, setting minimum requirements for graduation and teacher certification, and for many other purposes. Workshops for teachers deal with the curricular applications of proficiency concepts and the professional literature offers models for program design (e.g., Heilman & Kaplan, 1985; Medley, 1985).

Limitations

Among the variables affecting foreign language program design in the United States, the most serious concern is the element of time. In an early analysis of the factors central to language learning, Carroll (1967) found that time was the most important determiner of how well one learned a language. Few Americans, however, devote more than one or two years to it. Even a child takes five years, 24 hours per day, to acquire his or her native tongue, and government agencies have determined that approximately 480 hours of intensive instruction are required for the average learner to achieve a proficiency level of 2 ("advanced" on the ACTFL scale) in those languages that are most readily acquired by English speakers (including French, Spanish, and Italian).

The program developer is under great pressure to determine what elements are essential and find efficient ways to organize them. One solution, in addition to spiraling the material, is to specify for each objective one of three possible levels of accuracy: full control, partial control, or conceptual control (Heilman & Kaplan, 1985) with the degree of control increasing as the students' repertoire grows.

A second limiting variable is that of human resources. Because it is difficult for classroom teachers to remain abreast of new information and trends, the textbook tends to dictate. Although many school districts give teachers some opportunity to work together on curricular revisions, their time and training are often insufficient for the task. In addition, school districts and even state departments of instruction do not have foreign language specialists as consultants. ACTFL has embarked on a series of teacher education projects, including in-service workshops, publications devoted to the applications of proficiency concepts, and the development of guidelines for teacher education programs.

For the goal of oral proficiency, the ACTFL level descriptions are serving as a guide in many efforts by school districts and by colleges and universities to design coordinated curricula. Because the goals have already been broken down in some detail, program planners can build from the bottom up, determining first what is to be learned by beginners and adding functions, content, and linguistic and sociolinguistic elements in incremental steps.

Program Models

To provide solutions to the problems, successful models need to be identified, the models reputed to be successful require further research, and the results need to be shared widely. While little research has been done, several existing program types can be identified for each age group.

Elementary school programs fall into three categories: FLES (Foreign Languages in the Elementary School), which offers pull-out classes in a language for a limited number of hours or minutes each week; FLEX (Foreign Language Experiences), which offers young learners experiences in each of several languages and cultures, with emphasis on the cultures; and immersion programs, in which much or all of the child's curriculum is taught in the language. Mounting evidence indicates that immersion programs can achieve superlative results compared to isolated classes, and that learners of all ages acquire a language best while learning other material by means of it, rather than focusing on the language itself (Campbell, Gray, Rhodes, & Snow, 1985). Some large city districts offer all three programs, as well as bilingual education (Schinke-Llano, 1986). Unfortunately, foreign language instruction at the elementary level is still typically nonexistent in districts across the country.

At the high school level, more and more emphasis is placed on oral communication, and increasing numbers of schools are redesigning their curricula to conform to the ACTFL proficiency guidelines. Among more comprehensive emergent models are international high schools, magnet schools with a foreign language emphasis, and in-
ternational baccalaureate programs in which students receive a European education.

At the college level, the proficiency movement is having an impact wherever faculty members have attended testing and curriculum workshops. There is great potential for agreement on a common set of standards across the country, although the success of this movement has not yet been assessed. More is known about the effects of intensive language study, which produces outstanding results provided extra time is devoted to it (Benseler & Schulz, 1979). Too often, when time is added, the material is also expanded, thus decreasing the benefits. A few high school and college programs offer total immersion, which combines formal instruction with the exclusive use of the target language for communication throughout the school day (DeLorenzo & Gladstein, 1984).

Most language departments now offer special-purpose courses and many have developed degree programs in conjunction with other departments and colleges, notably business colleges (Grosse, 1985). When these programs offer courses in the major taught in the foreign language, they capitalize on the advantages to be gained from content-based instruction.

Proposals

The assumption that language study is not for the elite but necessary for the liberal education of all Americans leads to the conclusion that it is not effective to place all students into the same classes, provide for them everything that any of them might need, and require them to "cover" it in a year or two. In Canada a solution is sought through the establishment of a common core, which can be expanded or supplemented for learners with special purposes.

In the United States at least four groups of students can be identified with respect to their needs and interests: those who are primarily interested in the humanities, those who expect or hope to use the language in future careers, those who plan to teach it, and those who are fulfilling language requirements. A common core of material can be identified for these groups, in that they all need to know about languages and how they are acquired and be able to survive in another language and culture.

These goals imply a functional approach combined with metalinguistic analysis. Functions needed for physical, social, and psychological survival in another culture can be readily identified. The equivalent of the first two years of instruction should emphasize the basic knowledge, skills, and attitudes, both cultural and linguistic, that are essential for carrying out these goals.

Because students in this country vary considerably in time commitment as well as needs and interests, programs at the beginning and intermediate levels should offer several options, ranging from three hours of class per week to total immersion and promising differing degrees of proficiency according to the amount of time committed. At higher levels, language study is more independent, allowing for less variety in intensity but greater variety in content to meet specialized needs, and this content should be taught in the target language.

Conclusion

Students want and need to learn to communicate in other languages. Americans can no longer be content with anything less than programs that accomplish what they promise, promise what can realistically be accomplished, and meet the needs of a varied clientele. Immense changes are taking place in program design, but continued progress will require the involvement of the entire profession in designing and developing successful programs. Inservice and preservice teacher education hold the keys to success.

Notes

1. Under the National Defense Education Act of 1958, teachers were trained in summer institutes to use the audio-lingual method, which claimed a theoretical foundation in behavioral psychology and structural linguistics and emphasized speaking skill development through intensive oral drill.
5. Wilkins (1976) categorizes language functions into six groups: judgments and evaluation (e.g., approving, disapproving, blaming); persuasion (e.g., suggesting, advising); argument (e.g., agreeing, disagreeing, debating); rational inquiry and exposition (e.g., explaining, defining); personal emotions (e.g., loving, hating); and emotional relations (e.g., flattering, complimenting). Notions are meanings expressed through lexical and grammatical features, and include time, quantity, space, and relational meanings, certainty or uncertainty, and commitment.
6. Traditionally, students were treated as if they would become language specialists, with an innate interest in
the scholarly pursuit of literature and, more recently, linguistics. See McEwan & Minkle (1979), Myers (1980), and Rivers (1979) for reports of surveys. In a more recent informal survey (1986) of the Spanish students at Arizona State University, students indicated most often that they hoped to achieve some ability to speak Spanish, either overseas or in the Southwest. They also stated an interest in taking courses in Spanish for business, law, and medical purposes, and culture courses taught in Spanish, and surprising interest was expressed in total immersion for a semester (30% to 40% of the beginning and intermediate students). The most common complaint was that too much material was presented in too short a time for them to learn to use anything well.

7. The proficiency guidelines and other ACTFL materials on proficiency are available from the ACTFL Materials Center, 579 Broadway, Hastings-on-Hudson, NY 10706.

8. The ACTFL Series on Foreign Language Education has devoted three volumes to this topic. The most recent is the 1985 volume, Defining and Developing Proficiency: Guidelines, Implementations and Concepts (Canale, 1985).

9. These functions include giving biographical data, getting around in a city, staying in a hotel, extending and responding to informal and formal invitations, eating in a restaurant and in someone's home, taking care of medical and dental needs, meeting emergencies, shopping, and participating in recreational activities.

References


Copyright © 2001. All Rights Reserved.