

NEW DIRECTIONS IN STUDYING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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The current national interest in languages is not born from a resurgence of interest in the timeless goals of a humanistic education. Rather, it is economic and political pressure that has made foreign languages the talk of the day. Hence, the current push for pragmatic, functional language proficiency that enables its users to communicate with their foreign counterparts in authentic cultural settings.

1. Broadening the Definition of Language Study

The current national interest in languages is not born from a resurgence of interest in the timeless goals of a humanistic education. Rather, it is economic and political pressure that has made foreign languages the talk of the day. Hence, the current push for pragmatic, functional language proficiency that enables its users to communicate with their foreign counterparts in authentic cultural settings. This push for communicative competence — that is, for the use of language in its social context — has opened up the notion of language competence to include, besides a knowledge and a mastery of grammar and vocabulary at the sentence level, also a general discourse competence, as well as a strategic and sociolinguistic competence that go far beyond the traditional syllabus of a foreign language class.¹⁷⁶ Currently, the foreign language teaching profession is explicitly or implicitly basing its efforts on a new definition of language that could be expressed as follows:

“Language is the symbolic representation of a social reality that enables its users to distance themselves from it and thus to create, shape and change it. This constructed reality is given social truth and validity through the interactional efforts of speakers and hearers, readers and writers who negotiate their own and each other's intended meanings.”¹⁷⁷

Thus the concept of foreign language competency is exploding to include multiple linguistic, functional, cultural, and aesthetic competencies.¹⁷⁸ Yet the old institutional demarcation lines still exist. Language teachers are often in a province separate from their colleagues teaching literature. There is nowadays quite a split between those who focus on the purely pragmatic uses of language (functional proficiency) and those who emphasize as well its aesthetic, literary, and cultural dimensions, as well as between those engaged in

¹⁷⁶ Cf., Breen, M., Candlin, C.N., “The Essentials of a Communicative Curriculum in Language Teaching.” *Applied Linguistics* 1 (1980), pp. 89–112. Canale, M., Swain, M., “Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Second Language Teaching and Testing.” *Applied Linguistics* 1 (1980), pp.1–47. Kramsch, Claire, *Discourse Analysis and Second Language Teaching*. Washington: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1981.

¹⁷⁷ Kramsch, Claire, “The Discourse Factor in Language Learning.” Public lecture, Ohio State University, January, 1987.

¹⁷⁸ Cf. Jarvis, Gilbert A., “Proficiency Testing: A Matter of False Hopes?” *ADFL Bulletin* 18., 1986, pp. 20–21.

language for special purposes and those who teach language for general education. The fronts are drawn between the proponents of a foreign language requirement for everyone and those who advocate foreign languages only for the best and brightest, and there is a prestige differential between modern language study and the study of dead languages. However, recent developments in research, in pedagogy, and in the profession show signs of a dialectic resolution to these dichotomies. This dialectic resolution is often referred to as the study of discourse.

Once the goal is no longer philological competence and one expects students actually to be able to use the language in communicative situations in natural settings, one has to teach the full range of abilities for comprehending and interpreting, for communicating and expressing meanings according to unpredictable scripts. These meanings might be intended literally or figuratively, by interlocutors who are concerned about saving their own and each other's face in interactional encounters, and by writers and readers who are trying to convey and reconstruct socially and historically determined universes of meaning. It is this expression, interpretation, and exchange of intended meanings that linguists call discourse.¹⁷⁹

Thus, what needs to be taught is no longer the structure of language but foreign discourse in its cognitive and social dimensions. Studies in sociolinguistics confirm everyone's anecdotal experience that it is not enough to know the grammar, syntax, and vocabulary, or even to speak fluently, if one wants to "function appropriately" in the foreign environment with native speakers of the language. It is not enough to read fluently if one wishes to "understand" the intentions and implications of a written text, be it a newspaper article or a work of literature. Indeed the acquisition of foreign discourse overlaps with the acquisition of many other skills, namely, discourse ability and communicative ability, literacy and sociolinguistic competence.

Discourse ability in a foreign language is linked not only to context-embedded but also to context-reduced skills acquired in the native language. For example, foreign language competency in conducting small talk with short turns-at-talk relies heavily on the ability to make maximal use of contextual clues in face-to-face situations (e.g., interlocutors' gestures, facial expressions, listeners' feedback), but telling a story or presenting a report with long, uninterrupted turns requires the ability to adopt a "recipient design" that can operate in a much more context-reduced situation.¹⁸⁰ Similarly, the ability to write consistent and coherent essays or reports in the foreign language is determined by one's ability to use the language in a manner that expects minimal contextual knowledge of the reader. As linguists have shown, these are basic literacy skills that foreign language instruction has either to build upon or provide if they have not been developed in the native language.¹⁸¹ They do not emerge automatically with the acquisition of grammar and vocabulary.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. Kramsch, Claire. "Classroom Interaction and Discourse Options." *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 7 (1985), pp.159–68.

¹⁸⁰ Cf. Brown, G., Yule, G., *Teaching the Spoken Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1983, pp.124-6.

¹⁸¹ Cf. Snow, Catherine, "Beyond Conversation: Second Language Learners' Acquisition of Description and Explanation." *Research in Second Language Learning: Focus on the Classroom*, Ed. James P. Lantolf, Angela Labarca. Norwood: Ablex, 1987, pp. 3–16.

Communicative ability in the foreign language, by contrast with the mastery of grammatical or lexical structures, is linked to the conceptual level acquired in the mother tongue. Research suggests that where as foreign language aptitude is related to linguistic competence, communicative competence is related to cognitive complexity and interpersonal maturity developed in the native language.¹⁸² A study from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) seems to indicate that the ability to understand figurative uses of language and indirectness of speech is linked to age and nonverbal mental capacity rather than to linguistic ability.¹⁸³

Literacy in the foreign language, like literacy in the native tongue, is of various types, only one of which, namely, the analytic and logical that is characteristic of the mainstream white middle class, is accepted in academic settings.¹⁸⁴ What about the others (e.g., the analogical) that are characteristic of learners from other social and economic backgrounds? Should they not be taught in the foreign language? Moreover, language-proficiency results are strongly affected by the testing method, which is usually of an academic type, whether it be a reading test or an oral-proficiency interview. They do not automatically reflect what a subject can do in natural settings.¹⁸⁵

As long as we were only teaching students how to acquire the forms of the language one could argue that modern language learning was but “remedial” work on one’s mother tongue and that “(languages) cannot be learned by intellectual effort” but can be acquired only by “drill and other forms of repetitive practice”.¹⁸⁶ But now that foreign language teaching in academic settings is targeted for performance in foreign social settings, the field is encroaching on a variety of other disciplines. A broader definition of language competence now includes the general education skills developed in the rest of the curriculum.

2. The Benefits of Studying a Foreign Language

Most experts agree that the earlier a child is introduced to a second language, the greater the chances are that the child will become truly proficient in the language. A February 1996 Newsweek article made the claim that “A child taught a second language after the age of 10 or so is unlikely ever to speak it like a native.”¹⁸⁷ This statement is supported by linguists and has been proven in extensive research studies.

In addition to developing a lifelong ability to communicate with more people, children may derive other benefits from early language instruction, including improved overall school performance and superior problem-solving skills. Knowing a second language ultimately provides a competitive advantage in the work force by opening up additional job opportunities.

¹⁸² Cf. Horwitz, Elaine, “The Relationship between Conceptual Level and Communicative Competence in French.” *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 5.1, 1982, pp. 65–73.

¹⁸³ Cf. Harley, Birgit, P. Allen, J. Cummins, Swain M., *The Development of Bilingual Proficiency. Final Report. Vol. 1 of The Nature of Language Proficiency. Toronto: Modern Language Centre, OISE, 1987.*

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Heath, Shirley Brice, *Ways with Words, Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984, p.79

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Harley et al., p. 6

¹⁸⁶ Redfield, James, “The Politics of Language Instruction.” *ADFL Bulletin* 20.3, 1989, p.9

¹⁸⁷ *Newsweek Magazine*, February 19, 1996

Students of foreign languages have access to a greater number of career possibilities and develop a deeper understanding of their own and other cultures. Some evidence also suggests that children who receive second language instruction are more creative and better at solving complex problems. Students also gain an increased appreciation for literature, art, and music as a result of exposure to foreign cultures. Mental flexibility is enhanced by the reasoning, problem-solving and conceptualizing processes that are frequently used in learning a language.

These benefits hold true for the college-bound and noncollege-bound student alike. Even students considered to have poor basic skills gain advantages from foreign language study. According to Curtain and Pesola, "This may be an excellent time to shed the 'elitist' image that foreign languages have borne for most of this century in the United States. Evidence from the inner-city schools of Philadelphia, Milwaukee and Cincinnati, among others, supports the idea of including learners of all levels of ability and background in foreign language study. Students with poor skills may even have the most to gain from the opportunity to study languages."¹⁸⁸

Devoting part of the school day to foreign language study helps students in their mastery of other subjects—either directly through the application of improved verbal and thinking skills or indirectly as the result of improved self-confidence.

At the beginning stage of learning, today's modern foreign language teachers emphasize the ability to understand and to be understood more than the ability to manipulate grammatical structures. They rely less on repetitive drills and more on activities designed to simulate real-life situations. However, teachers of classical languages continue to emphasize grammar and pronunciation as a means of communication and comparison with other cultures.

Today's foreign language students are producers of real language, not just repeaters of artificial dialogues out of textbooks. They are active participants in a two-way street of communication, not simply memorizers of vocabulary and grammar rules.

Language education is currently based on cognitive psychology, which views the mind as a creative, dynamic agent of learning. The student is an active participant in the learning process rather than a sponge soaking up information and responding to stimuli. According to cognitive theory, individuals control and are responsible for their own learning. Learning is an internal process, not an external force.

Foreign language teachers have moved from treating knowledge of a foreign language as an end in itself to treating the language as a means to a more significant end: communication. Emphasis has changed from what students *know* about a language to what they can actually *do* with a language. As a result, important developments have occurred in recent years in foreign language classrooms, where now we find:

¹⁸⁸ Curtain, Helen A., Pesola, Carol Ann, *Languages and Children, Making the Match*, 2nd edition, Longman Publishing House, 1993, p.265

1. student-centred instruction, where students have more opportunities to speak and to initiate conversation;
2. more opportunities for cooperative learning and less reliance on competition;
3. more emphasis on effective communication and less on error-correction ;
4. more use of authentic cultural materials (e.g., restaurant menus, newspapers, Web sites, television programs) as springboards for communication in the language and less separation of the study of culture from language production;
5. the use of interweaving, spiralling, and recycling to reinforce what is taught and to meet the needs of students with different learning styles;
6. the use of an interdisciplinary approach in which foreign language instruction connects with instruction in other subject areas.

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