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Assessing Second Language Proficiency in an American University

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Abstract — There are currently two nation-wide trends that impinge significantly on language teaching and assessment at the university level in the U.S. One is the general wave of education reform, the other is the so-called "proficiency" movement in language teaching. That being said, these two categories are much too broad in their definitions and implications to be of any use in discussing what we wish to address here: actual practice in the second language classroom. We will therefore begin by constraining the relevant characteristics of each of these. We will then proceed to discuss their ongoing implications for what actually happens in the curriculum at a single American university. Portland State is offered here as representative of American institutions of higher education insofar as it has undergone significant administrative and curricular restructuring at all levels over the last five to ten years. Indeed, because of its location, its mission and its leadership, Portland State University is in many ways a model institution for its response to contemporary demands placed on education -- from within and without, by choice as well as by public fiat. The goal in this paper is to demonstrate how one academic unit within a public institution responds to the diverse pressures for change, and what the ramifications of that response are for processes of assessment.

1. BACKGROUND: EDUCATION REFORM

In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk*, a document that quickly came to be viewed as a call to arms for American education. The wave of change that has since overtaken educational institutions can be broadly viewed from two perspectives, that of higher education and that of K-12. That these influence one another goes without saying, but the impact of and response to education reform has been different in the two sectors, and this has ramifications at all levels of the educational enterprise.

To begin with, when we consider educational reform in higher education, we are struck first and foremost by the fact that the role, mission and place of higher education in American society have come under serious scrutiny. Those of us who are involved in college and university teaching are all too familiar with contemporary titles such as *The Closing of the American Mind* (Bloom 1987), *American Professors: A National Resource Imperiled* (Boyer and Schuster 1986), *Beyond the Ivory Tower: Social Responsibilities of the Modern University* (Bok 1982), *The Battleground of the Curriculum* (Carnochan 1993), *How Professors Play the Cat Guarding the Cream: Why We're Paying*

More and Getting Less in Higher Education (Huber 1995), *Up the University: Re-creating Higher Education in America* (Solomon and Solomon 1993), and *The Moral Collapse of the University* (Wilshire 1990) where the virtues and failings of American higher education are attacked and/or defended in often excruciating detail. Yet regardless of how we as educators respond intellectually to the argumentation contained in the foregoing, we are none of us immune to the waves of change that have spread through the academy as a result. We are all affected, in particular, by what Lucas (1996) calls the "accountability imperative" that calls higher education to answer for what American university graduates can and cannot do. Public institutions, especially, are held increasingly answerable to the people who support them. The very word 'accountability' has become a buzzword in discussions of everything from academic freedom to accreditation to budgeting. And in tandem with 'accountability' comes 'assessment,' without which the question of whether we are living up to our standards of accountability cannot be answered.

On the elementary-secondary front, the educational reforms that span the 1980's to the present marked unprecedented change nationwide. In those ten years, 45 of 50 states changed high school graduation requirements; virtu-

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ally all states implemented changes in policies that affect teachers (for example, the number of states requiring testing of some sort as a condition of teacher employment increased from 28 to 46); administrative reforms of one kind or another altered the traditional structure of schools throughout the U.S. (at least 25 of 50 states initiated policies designed to increase parent/student choice in selection of educational programs) (Fuhrman, Elmore and Massell 1993: 4-5). And in elementary-secondary education, as in higher education, accountability and assessment are two of the major refrains that accompany change. Koppich and Kerchner (1993) observe that professional accountability is becoming a collectively bargained bilateral agreement whose focus is on the reform agenda of improved student achievement (102). And achievement, again, means assessment.

We wish to point out that the two moves for greater accountability and improved assessment are evident not only in general education — which is the focus of this workshop — but across the university curriculum. Both themes are abundantly represented by the extraordinary changes in the field of second language education over the last twenty years. The next section outlines the contemporary trends in assessment of language proficiency — in general as well as in Japanese language in particular. We propose to tie those trends to a specific case of education reform: Oregon's Proficiency-based Admission Standards. Finally, we will discuss the implications of all these reforms on assessment of language proficiency in our own university setting.

2. THE PROFICIENCY MOVEMENT

Language teachers often take it as a point of pride that the field of language teaching had an early start on reform. As early as 1979, language educators at all levels were moving in the direction of establishing a set of national standards that would allow teachers from disparate languages to talk to one another, along with defining competency-based teaching and assessment instruments, all of which have come to be embodied in the "proficiency movement" in language teaching. In fact, it is common among contemporary language educators in the US to take the word "proficiency" for granted.

We might begin with a provisional definition for the term "proficiency" which is taken in language circles to refer, quite simply, to an ability to do something with language; 'proficiency' is generally set in contrast to 'achievement', or a measure of what someone knows about language. As outlined in ACTFL's Standards for foreign language learning: Preparing for the 21st century (1996) proficiency instruction refers to instilling skills in "knowing how, when and why to say what to whom" in a second language (11). This is opposed to more traditional (and narrower) focuses of instruction that concentrate on the how (grammar) to say

what (vocabulary) with which many of us are familiar in our experience of secondary language instruction in the past. Anyone who sat through high school with a grammar primer memorizing vocabulary lists, verb conjugations, or the declensions for masculine and feminine (and perhaps neuter) nouns is a product of the older, more traditional approach. The notion was that memorizing facts about language led somehow inexorably to an ability to speak and use it. It didn't take long to discover that this is not the case, and proficiency instruction as a response was designed to facilitate genuine interaction with representatives of the target language/culture.

In response to a report from the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies in 1979, ACTFL (the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages), in collaboration with ETS (Educational Testing Services), took on the task of adapting for general use the so-called Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) definitions of language proficiency. The ILR definitions, it was agreed, were effectively demonstrated tools and standards for assessment of language proficiency — that is, communicative competence as determined by an oral interview which assessed a speaker/learner's ability to perform various tasks in a realistic setting. On the other hand, the original government guidelines ranked language ability on a scale ranging from 0 — little or no ability — to 5 — educated-native speaker ability, outlined in broad terms as follows:

ILR Level Definitions

- Level 0: No measurable proficiency.
- Level 1: Elementary proficiency: Able to satisfy routine travel needs and minimal courtesy requirements.
- Level 2: Limited working proficiency: Able to satisfy routine social demands and limited work requirements.
- Level 3: Professional working proficiency: Able to speak the language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, and professional topics.
- Level 4: Full professional proficiency: Able to use the language fluently and accurately on all levels normally pertinent to professional needs.
- Level 5: Native or bilingual proficiency: Speaking proficiency equivalent to that of an educated native speaker

It quickly becomes clear even to the lay observer that this scale is neither practical nor achievable for K-12 or college/university instruction. That is, bringing students to native or near-native ability over the course of, for example, a 4-year language college major is outside the goals of even the best academic language programs. Rather, college and university students tend to spend most of their time pro-

gressing from 0 capability to the 2-3 range. The task of the ACTFL/ETS project was, therefore, to refine and expand the lower three government rankings into something that would be usable in the college/university setting. In 1986 ACTFL published the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines which expand the lowest three ILR levels into four basic divisions — Novice, Intermediate, Advanced and Superior — which are themselves subdivided, such that the resulting ACTFL guidelines classify proficiency according to nine levels:

- Novice-Low
- Novice-Mid ILR 0
- Novice-High
- Intermediate-Low
- Intermediate-Mid ILR 1
- Intermediate-High ILR 1+
- Advanced ILR 2
- Advanced-Plus ILR 2+
- Superior ILR 3-5

Spanish, French and German language specialists agreed to abide by the generic Guidelines, in which an Intermediate-Mid speaker is defined as follows:

Intermediate-Mid (Speaking)

Able to handle successfully a variety of uncomplicated, basic and communicative tasks and social situations. Can talk simply about self and family members. Can ask and answer questions and participate in simple conversations on topics beyond the most immediate needs, e.g. personal history and leisure time activities. Utterance length increases slightly [from novice level], but speech may continue to be characterized by frequent long pauses, since the smooth incorporation of even basic conversational strategies is often hindered as the speaker struggles to create appropriate language forms. Pronunciation may continue to be strongly influenced by first language and fluency may still be strained. Although misunderstandings still arise, the Intermediate-Mid speaker can generally be understood by sympathetic interlocutors.

Compare this to the intermediate-mid reader:

Intermediate-Mid (Reading)

Able to read consistently with increased understanding simple connected texts dealing with a variety of basic and social needs. Such texts are still linguistically noncomplex and have a clear underlying internal structure. They impart basic information about which the reader has to make minimal suppositions and to which the reader brings personal interest and/or knowledge. Examples may include short, straightforward descriptions of persons, places, and things written for a wide audience.

The ACTFL guidelines provided for the first time a com-

mon metric for assessing proficiency in all four skills of a second language; Spanish teachers could finally talk to German teachers who could talk to French teachers, because all had agreed upon what it meant to be a “novice”, an “intermediate” or an “advanced” speaker of a language: the criteria were the same across the three languages. Problems arose, however, among languages outside this core three. Japanese, Arabic, Chinese, and Russian specialists were unanimous in protesting that the generic guidelines were inadequate for defining proficiency in the “less-commonly taught” languages. ACTFL therefore embarked on a project to define proficiency for these four languages, and the results of the task forces assigned to draw up guidelines for each language appeared in the ACTFL journal *Annals* between 1987 and 1989 (see References section).

To give some idea of how the guidelines work for a specific language, compare the foregoing descriptions of an Intermediate-Mid speaker and listener of Spanish/French/German with following descriptions of an Intermediate-Low, Intermediate-Mid, and Intermediate-High speaker of Japanese :

Intermediate-Low

Can ask and answer questions, such as 今何時ですか。8:00です。 Can engage in a simple, reactive conversation using formal nonpast/past, affirmative/negative forms (A: 僕は昨日フットボールを見にいきました。 B: そうですか。 僕もいきました。), demonstratives (これ・それ・あれは私の車です。) and classifiers (紙が2枚あります。) Misunderstanding frequently arises from poor pronunciation, wrong pitch-accent, and limited vocabulary

Intermediate-Mid

Can ask and answer simple questions on topics such as personal history (お兄さんがありますか?), leisure time activities (映画によく行きますか。), and simple transactions, such as at the post office (100円切手, 5枚ください。), etc. Quantity of speech is increased and quality is improved [over novice level]. Greater accuracy in basic constructions and use of high frequency verbs and auxiliary verbs (A: 今何をしていますか。 B: テレビをえています。). The Intermediate-Mid speaker is generally a less reactive and more interactive conversational partner. (A: 映画に行きましようか。 B: いいえ, 私は音学会に行きたいです。). The use of classifiers is expanded, and the use of particles is more appropriate.

Intermediate-High

Emerging ability to distinguish between politeness and formality usage in most uncomplicated communicative tasks and social situations. (先生, どちらへいらっしゃいますか。). There is emerging evidence of connected discourse, particularly for simple narration and/or description. (A: 昨日何をしましたか。 蕨都に行って, お寺を

見て歩きました。天気がよくて、とても楽しかったです。もう一度行きたいと思います。)

Similarly, compare the Intermediate-Mid speaker, and Intermediate-Mid reader:

Intermediate-Mid

Sufficient comprehension to understand specially-prepared material of several connected sentences for informative purposes and to understand with use of a dictionary main ideas and some facts in authentic material. Can understand and follow events of a very simple passage in specially-prepared material when content deals with basic situations and sentence structure is simple, i.e. without complex subordination, i.e. 5月5日の朝, 10:30の新幹線で東京駅に着きます。東京ははじめてですから, よく分かりません。すみませんが, 迎えにきてください。ホームで待っています。Can decode with considerable effort and frequent error, hand-printed notes or short letters for main facts. Such tasks will be characterized by frequent errors and moderate success depending on subject matter, amount of unfamiliar vocabulary, simplicity of style, and skill with dictionary.

Since their initial appearance, the Guidelines have had far-reaching influence on how the profession thinks about language teaching and assessment in the United States. Not only do they spell out descriptions of what foreign language study should prepare students to do, they also identify the broad goals of the language-teaching discipline, thus providing a common yardstick which makes possible the ensuing (and ongoing) discussion of performance assessment.

ACTFL continues to promote and refine proficiency guidelines at the same time that it provides professional development training in the assessment of oral proficiency. It should be emphasized that there is far from universal agreement on either the generic or the language-specific Guidelines. They are still considered in some sense to be “provisional” and their refinement is an ongoing process. But there is agreement that the guidelines have served to generate discussion in the language teaching profession, and have given a boost to its efforts to convey the goals of language pedagogy to a wider audience, from education and government policy-makers to the general public.

Probably because the early leaders and practitioners of the proficiency movement came from higher education, the movement’s impact was most immediate at the college and university level. But in ensuing years, the significance of proficiency has come to be felt in elementary and secondary education as well — whether because a good thing cannot be kept a secret, because the demand for curricular reform and national standards leads to innovation, or because today’s college educators have produced a generation of K-12 teachers who are trained in a communicative framework. Two documents that demonstrate the impact of pro-

iciency on K-12 language education at the national level are ACTFL’s (1996) Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century and the National Foreign Language Center’s (NFLC) Framework for Introductory Japanese Language Curricula in American High Schools and Colleges (Unger, et. al. 1993). Although the latter is generic (applies to all languages) and the former Japanese-specific, what these two documents share is:

- a consensus on standards;
 - agreement on an approach to language teaching and learning that focuses on communicative competence (proficiency);
- and
- an agreement that there needs to be a conversation between K-12 and college university educators that leads to seamless articulation between the two.

Having reached consensus on standards and approach, the conversation between K-12 and higher education is problematic. Rarely are these two called upon to talk to one another as equals. Yet that is precisely what happened in Oregon as a result of the a commitment to align higher education and K-12 via a set of education reforms known as the Proficiency-based Admission Standards.

3. RESTRUCTURING THE CURRICULUM: OREGON’S PASS

In 1993, the Oregon State Board of Higher Education adopted the policy that students who are applying to any Oregon state institution of higher education will be required to demonstrate a level of proficiency in a set of academic disciplines, including a second language. This decision was in turn influenced by a law that was intended to implement proficiency- and standards-based educational reform at the K-12 levels. That law, HB (House Bill) 3656, which was passed in 1991, specified that “Certificates of Initial Mastery” and “Certificates of Advanced Mastery” (CIM and CAM) would be awarded to students who measure up to a set of designated standards in the various academic areas. Although the initial law has been revised, its core principles remain unchanged. The core principles that are common to CIM and CAM are proficiency- or outcome- based education and standards-based education.

Proficiency- or outcome-based education entails that each student not only undergo instruction at school but also be required to demonstrate at some end point what s/he has learned. In standards-based education, students work to meet an established set of standards that are at once high but at the same time reasonable and attainable. These two educational orientations combined, the first step in implementation of the broadly written new law was to identify and establish “what students should know and be able to do” — namely, “content statements” (Resnick and Nolan, 1995: 103). Those content statements were outlined in a

document known as PASS — the Proficiency-based Admission Standards Study — which was drawn up by representatives from both higher education and K-12 in the state (Conley and Tell 1995).

Establishment of the content statements was a very sensitive issue because at one extreme it was thought that setting too high standards might lead to a failure on the part of school districts (and therefore the state) while at the other extreme setting too low standards might undermine the original intent of the education reform. In Oregon, the ACTFL guidelines were adopted as the standards for the second language requirement at both K-12 and post-secondary levels. For the three commonly taught languages, Spanish, French, and German, the PASS level was set at Intermediate Mid; for Japanese the PASS level was set at Novice High (Oregon Department of Education, 1994. Oregon Foundation for Developing Second Languages). In addition, six benchmark stages, which identify increasing levels of competence between ACTFL levels, were established in order to help students progress toward the terminal standards, presumably as they advanced in grade level. It was then decided that the Benchmark Stage 4 would define the CIM level (required for graduation), and the Benchmark Stage 6 the CAM level (required for advanced placement in any institution within the Oregon State System of Higher Education or OSSHE).

The Japanese Benchmarks for K-12 were created by a working group consisting of eight teachers, Japanese and American, from elementary, secondary, and post-secondary schools. This working group was formed by the OSSHE Japanese Language Project (JLP) whose purpose is to enhance Japanese language education at the secondary level in Oregon. For the commonly taught languages, ACTFL levels conveniently align with the Benchmark Stages 1 to 4. For Japanese, it was decided that what students should know and be able to do at Novice High would be broken down into six Benchmark Stages with an appropriate sequencing of content. The JLP group met regularly to discuss what topics, functions, and accuracy levels are to be included in the six benchmarks. Through the discussion process, teachers at college level gained some understanding about what difficulties elementary and secondary teachers face at lower levels, while classroom teachers in K-12 who had been unfamiliar with the notion of proficiency became more familiar with the notion.

According to Resnick and Nolan (1995), the content statements alone are not sufficient for the standards to be functional. The standards need to contain "performance descriptions," i.e., "statements of what a student might do to demonstrate knowledge or skill" (107), and "'good enough' criteria", or so-called "passing level" (103). These components fall in the territory of assessment. Since the nature of proficiency entails demonstration of designated performance with a high standard, educational institutions

are required to identify in what context students need to demonstrate what they know and are able to do and, in addition, to establish what constitutes "good enough" performance.

Again, in Oregon, the collaboration between the K-12 and the higher education levels contributed to the development of second language oral assessment instruments and the training in their implementation. As the Japanese Benchmark working group was working on their task, another group was formed by the OSSHE Japanese Language Project for the purpose of creating an assessment mechanism. It was planned that an external evaluator, an ACTFL certified tester, would go to a school and administer an abbreviated version of an oral proficiency interview. The assessment instrument developed by the OSSHE JLP assessment group involves the following procedure: a student draws a card from a set of question cards prepared for the Benchmark Stage for which s/he is being tested, an interviewer asks in Japanese the question on the card drawn by the student, and the student answers it. Based on this assessment created by the Japanese assessment group, the state professional organization, the Confederation in Oregon for Language Teachers (COFLT), closely worked with the OSSHE and created an assessment for the commonly taught languages. Thus, in this instance, Japanese led in the development of assessment instruments for K-12 in Oregon. Needless to say, as the terminal standards differ between Japanese and the commonly taught languages, the contents of the questions also differ. While the Japanese assessment questions are designed to solicit set phrases and sentences (Novice level), the cards for the commonly taught languages contain situations which are designed to solicit open-ended, extensive responses from students (Intermediate level).

Following the development of the initial assessment instruments, COFLT and OSSHE along with the OSSHE JLP launched a series of training sessions and workshops for Japanese testers to be certified; a secondary purpose of the training workshops was to collect a large sample of student performance in order to ascertain the validity of the agreed upon "passing level." In the long run, a procedure to certify testers is expected to be established once a passing level for oral performance in a second language has been established.

Through the course of these tester training sessions, the teachers involved had first-hand experience of what their own students need to demonstrate and how they will be evaluated. This echoes the argument Resnick and Nolan put forward: learning to grade performance according to scoring rubrics that express "good enough" criteria is a powerful introduction to the idea and practice of standards-based education (113).

Yet another challenge in making standards functional is getting teachers and students to understand in a meaningful way just what standards are. A radical shift in curriculum

planning and teaching must be elicited from teachers. Clearly, covering N chapters of a textbook is not sufficient for helping students meet the proficiency-based standards. Almost universally second language teachers in Oregon will be required to restructure their existing curricula, or in some cases create entirely new curricula, in accordance with the Benchmark standards. In a very practical sense, they will be shifting emphasis from the traditional focus on the how (grammar) to say what (vocabulary) to bona fide communicative interaction. Learning about communicative teaching techniques is relatively easy, but for the newly learned teaching techniques to be effective in actual practice, a teacher must have a solid foundation in curriculum planning with a clear vision of where s/he is taking students. In other words, the teacher needs to have a thorough understanding of goals and objectives which are based on the Benchmarks. Thus, individual teachers need first to articulate goals and objectives in terms that are sensible for the instructional purposes. To do so, they need to understand what it is for someone to be at Novice High on the ACTFL proficiency scale. Then, they need to identify and sequence instructional points by transforming the targeted skills and knowledge into chunks that make sense within language pedagogy. In fact, this year's OSSHE JLP summer workshop attempted to achieve these two tasks, articulating goals and objectives in terms of the Benchmarks, and developing curricula based on the Benchmarks.

Probably the biggest change on the part of students that results from education reform is that students are held accountable for learning and meeting established standards in proficiency- and standards-based education (Schalock and Smith, 1997). Accordingly, so-called "seat-time" and "extra credit assignments" will no longer have any impact on attainment of the standards. Students themselves must demonstrate whether they have acquired skills and knowledge that are designated in the standards. The teacher's stamp or endorsement cannot substitute for a student's actual performance. A course grade and credits on a transcript in conventional education become meaningless unless these records are founded on the measurement of the student's actual proficiency. With a new focus on students' accountability, schools and teachers are being required to make every effort to get students engaged in their own education.

In Oregon, some teachers have already restructured their curricula and teaching methods in alignment with proficiency- and standards-based education; some are beginning or still trying to determine what they need to change to come into compliance with the education reforms.

According to the current timeline set by the OSSHE PASS Project, by the year 2005 all the incoming students to an OSSHE institution will have the designated proficiency level in a second language and will be placed at the second year level or higher (COFLT 1997). However, the question

arises as to whether such incoming students will have the same skills as those who have undergone language training in the university setting. Is the curriculum of the second-year university language course appropriate for those who have succeeded in the PASS? And where does responsibility lie for smooth articulation? Restructuring, or at least reconsidering, the curricula at the post-secondary level according to the CIM/CAM and PASS would seem to be a necessary step for individual academic units at OSSHE universities.

4. ASSESSING JAPANESE LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN A UNIVERSITY SETTING

The assessment of language ability serves a multitude of purposes in a university setting. Clearly, assessing student progress across time is one of these. But within the Japanese program at Portland State, in addition to testing

1. enrolled students for the purpose of determining their progress in the language, we also carry on assessment of
2. incoming students for purposes of placement, and within this category, we must distinguish between
 - 2a. students who come to us from Oregon schools — outlined above;
 - 2b. students who come to us from outside the Oregon public education system — such students are tested and advised to enter an appropriate class level depending on their performance in the test, regardless of how much Japanese they may have studied elsewhere or how many credits they have transferred to Portland State.
3. exiting students (who may or may not have taken a course with us) for the purpose of determining whether they meet academic requirements set up by other units in the institution (for example, the linguistics program requires students to demonstrate second-year proficiency in a non-Indo-European language; many of the M.A. programs have a two-year language requirement),
4. enrolled students for the purpose of determining our progress — that is, program assessment is one of the requirements of education reform mentioned earlier.

Thus there are, in fact, five "types" of testing that may be going on at any given point in the academic calendar. Yet all Japanese testing shares one feature, and that is that it is done in a proficiency framework. We outline here the parameters of these various kinds of assessment and their relationships to each other.

4.1 TESTING STUDENTS WHO ARE ENROLLED IN JAPANESE CLASSES AT PORTLAND STATE FOR THE PURPOSE OF DETERMINING THEIR PROGRESS IN THE LANGUAGE

The Portland State Department of Foreign Languages agreed

early on when proficiency became a call to arms that it would establish required levels of proficiency for exiting majors as well as approximate levels of proficiency to be met at each level of study. Thus our testing procedures throughout the Japanese language classes, for example, are gauged to the ACTFL Japanese Proficiency Guidelines.

In many ways, this makes the job of assessment easier, since the outline of most tests is provided by an entity—ACTFL—outside the institution. The Portland State Japanese program has, for example, determined that a first-year ‘A’ level student should achieve a Novice-High proficiency level, that a second-year ‘A’ level student should achieve an Intermediate-Low proficiency level, that a third-year ‘A’ level student should achieve an Intermediate-Mid proficiency level, and that a fourth-year ‘A’ level student should achieve an Intermediate-High proficiency level. This carries over to classroom practice in a very direct manner: we must teach in a way that enables students to measure up to the agreed upon goal. It also means that we can give to students early on in their study program a description of how they will be evaluated at the end of each level of study. In the case of all Japanese courses, exams are based on the content of the textbook in combination with the skills described for the corresponding levels in the ACTFL guidelines, and are a part of the course syllabus given to students on the first day of the course. This constitutes the core of Japanese language assessment at Portland State.

4.2 TESTING INCOMING STUDENTS FOR PURPOSES OF PLACEMENT

Until about ten years ago, Japanese fit very comfortably into the “less commonly taught” languages (LCT’s). Many LCT’s are distinguished by their special level of difficulty (for English speakers) and traditionally low enrollment — features that are undoubtedly related. Twenty years ago there were very few places where one could even study Japanese, let alone transfer from one program to another. With the boom in Japanese enrollment that began in the mid-1980s, that situation changed with the result that students who transferred from one institution to another (a common enough phenomenon in the U.S. but a typical one at Portland State) brought with them credits and study experience that had to be evaluated in order for them to matriculate.

As was mentioned in the previous section, as of 2001 we face a special situation in the case of students who enter Portland State from an Oregon public high school. As a state institution we are bound to abide by the agreement to allow graduating high school students who earn a CAM in Japanese to place automatically into the second-year course. At the same time, we all envision the possibility that that articulation might not be a smooth one — depending on where the student has studied, how much time elapses between graduation and university admittance, and individual

factors, it is possible that such a student will not be adequately prepared for second-year university work in Japanese. This is only one of many potential scenarios that develop in the question of articulation — the movement of students from level to level and program to program or institution to institution.

The procedure for evaluating transferring students is to interview them in a proficiency framework to determine how their language level compares with those designated by the program (described above) for the various levels. Once the student’s skills are evaluated, s/he is advised to move into what we view as an appropriate course. It should be kept in mind that the student is being held up to an ‘A’ level standard. Thus, the ‘C’ student who comes to us with two years of Japanese might be advised to repeat one or both years of study. Students are given a certain amount of leeway in making their own decision about where they want to pick up their study of Japanese, but it is always made clear that the transfer evaluation standard is an ‘A’ and that our advice is geared to that high standard of performance.

4.3 TESTING EXITING STUDENTS

Essentially identical to the preceding in form but different in function is the testing of exiting students who are required by their academic units to demonstrate proficiency in a foreign language as a requirement for graduation. When the Foreign Languages department moved to defining its courses in terms of expected proficiency levels, the rest of the university was asked to do the same, such that a department which had, for example, a two-year second language requirement redefined that requirement as “proficiency equivalent to two-years of study.” It does not matter how the students acquire the requisite skills — students may take Japanese classes at Portland State, at another institution in the U.S. or in a study abroad experience in Japan. What is required is that prior to graduation the student must go to the Japanese program and undergo the assessment procedure for demonstrating Japanese proficiency at the required level. At Portland State, this is the same procedure that incoming students undergo: they are interviewed in a proficiency framework to determine whether their language level compares with that of a second-year student at Portland State. Specific content is not an issue. If the student passes, nothing more is required. If the student does not pass, s/he is required to do remedial study until s/he reaches the required level. Usually this means taking a class at Portland State.

4.4 TESTING ENROLLED STUDENTS FOR THE PURPOSE PROGRAM EVALUATION

There are advantages and disadvantages in the use of proficiency assessment in all of the foregoing scenarios. In a global (practical) sense, acceptance of the proficiency guidelines has meant that language teachers are agreed on what

skills learners need in order to function in a foreign country such as Japan. The fact the most colleges and universities in the State of Oregon had agreed on the merits of proficiency teaching and assessment made implementation of the K-12 education reforms much smoother. Because foreign language teaching as a field had already made the commitment to proficiency assessment, foreign language teachers in the state were actually already poised to define the levels required for proficiency-based assessment in the education reforms.

On the other hand proficiency assessment offers nothing that can be termed a body of knowledge which students must master. It defines skills, but not specific content. In the Oregon K-12 reforms, for example, the content is left very much to the individual school or program. On the practical level this has had serious impact on the speed with which reform could be implemented. It has also meant that frequently students cannot transfer smoothly between programs — high school to university or university to university. Thus, proficiency assessment does nothing to alleviate the problem of articulation or enabling students to move smoothly between programs.

Proficiency testing is also “labor-intensive.” A major task at the beginning of every academic year is the assessment of students who come to Portland State with Japanese study experience at other institutions. For those students who wish to demonstrate exiting proficiency, faculty members must be prepared to administer a test at almost any time in the academic year. An adequate oral proficiency interview (OPI) as defined by ACTFL takes anywhere from twenty to thirty minutes per person; the tester must probe the subject’s skills in sufficient depth that both are satisfied that s/he has produced the best language sample s/he is capable of. Thus testing becomes a major component of a faculty member’s workload.

Though students are being tested for different purposes, we view it as crucial for program consistency that the instruments used for testing measure the same skills. That is, a central goal of the Japanese program is to ensure that students who undergo two years of training and plan to continue on to third-year Japanese have skills comparable to those students who are tested and placed into third-year, as well as those students who are judged to have fulfilled the requirement for two years of language study (wherever they may have acquired those skills). The proficiency framework allows us to do this. If all final evaluation is based on the proficiency guidelines, it guarantees consistency.

On the other hand, there are clearly other modes for evaluating students, many of which are easier or more expedient than the proficiency interview. With the boom of Japanese enrollments that occurred ten years ago came an annual marathon of student assessment. While examinations and placement interviews used to take at most a day,

they exploded as students began to clamor for Japanese instruction. Portland State was not the only institution to go on a frantic search for faster and easier ways of evaluating students’ Japanese abilities. One obvious solution was to find a standardized instrument, compare its results to the proficiency interview, and if the correlation was strong enough to substitute it for the more labor-intensive interview technique. In principle, simple; in practice, quite complex.

Over the past ten years, the Portland State Japanese program has conducted two studies that attempt to determine whether standardized tests are as accurate in assessing student progress in Japanese as the proficiency interview itself. These studies also serve as measures of overall program effectiveness (Portland State’s program in comparison to other institutions) since the standardized tests are normed according to student performance at colleges and universities across the United States and Canada.

The first study (Wetzel 1990) was actually carried out when there was only one standardized test of Japanese available in the U.S.: the Japanese Proficiency Test prepared and published by ETS. A pilot project was set up to determine

- whether scores on the ETS test correlated with level of study at Portland State,
- whether ACTFL proficiency level (determined by an outside examiner) correlated with level of study at Portland State, and/or
- whether scores on the ETS test correlated with ACTFL proficiency level.

The results of this first study were decidedly mixed. There was an overall increase in all three test results over years of study, but the correlation was not absolute. Nor was there any reliable correlation between any two of the assessment instruments. A confounding factor was surely the variation in student performance that one finds in any educational setting, here defined by their final assessment in terms of a university grade — A through F. The sample was not large enough to determine with any certainty, but one suspects that ‘A’ students performed better on all the tests than did ‘C’ students. In fact, we discovered anecdotally that the most reliable indicator of student ability was their own personal assessment: When asked whether they could perform certain tasks as defined in the ACTFL guidelines (such as whether their language was “survival” level), students were remarkably candid and accurate.

Two things prompted Watanabe (1995) to pursue the question of whether ACTFL proficiency level had any relationship to other assessment instruments. One was the K-12 outcome-based education requirements that have been instituted in Oregon, discussed in the previous section. The other was the already mentioned decision by the Oregon State System of Higher Education to (re-)institute a two-year language requirement at the university level. For both

of these the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines were adapted as a matter of public policy for evaluation purposes. Again in Watanabe's study, the results were mixed. A correlation did emerge between oral proficiency and level of university study, but proficiency level had only a moderate correlation with ETS test performance.

As measures of program effectiveness, these two studies yielded useful information that led to reforms in the curriculum. It was decided, for example, to increase time required and therefore the number of credits assigned to Japanese languages courses. The purpose of this was twofold:

1. it gave students the clear message that Japanese requires a stronger commitment than other foreign languages, the assumption being that student commitment and motivation are the two strongest factors in success at Japanese language study;
2. student advancement from proficiency level to proficiency level was at times infinitesimal in comparison with coursework — to the extent that it made the ACTFL guidelines themselves almost meaningless as measures of progress. A student could, for example, remain at the Intermediate-mid proficiency level from second through third-year Japanese — a frustrating situation for both student and instructor. Requiring more time and assigning more credits increased the pace of students' progress through the language.

As checks on curricular reform at the public policy level, these two studies are decidedly unsettling. As Watanabe points out, the ACTFL guidelines and the oral proficiency interview are open to a good deal of criticism. Many researchers find the definitions of the criteria problematic. (As was previously mentioned, ACTFL considers all of the language guidelines to be "provisional" — that is, open to argument and revision.) It is well-known in the field of language pedagogy that the proficiency levels themselves are not "end points", but that is often how they are taken in statements of public policy. There is, moreover, no empirical evidence that would reflect absolute linguistic proficiency in what is described as the highest (educated native speaker) or lowest (no measurable proficiency) levels (Watanabe 1995:4). Lantolff and Frawley (1988) find that the interview itself is not a context in which language proficiency can be measured — it is fallacious to assume that an interview is representative of interaction in the real world. Finally, the proficiency interview "gives a single global rating to the whole of the examinee's oral performance. Some researchers question whether or not a single rating or scoring is the most appropriate way to capture one's oral language ability" (Watanabe 1995: 5). A serious stumbling block in Oregon's K-12 education reforms was the task of translating the (already chimerical) proficiency definitions into something that parents and students could understand and teachers could implement. Although there is research to indicate that oral proficiency rating correlates with level

of study, the issues surrounding the theoretical constructs that underlie proficiency itself can only undermine popular confidence in proficiency as a public policy tool.

5. CONCLUSION

There are any number of other avenues for examining the outcomes of teaching that hinge on the notion of oral proficiency. One that is currently under wide discussion in the field of Japanese is the problem of articulation. We mentioned above that Portland State is not alone in experiencing a good deal of frustration in assessing students who transfer from other institutions and who come to us equipped with only some of the requisite skills they need for moving into Portland State classes. The two professional organizations that represent teachers of Japanese at college and K-12, the Association of Teachers of Japanese and the National Council of Secondary Teachers of Japanese, see this problem as sufficiently serious to merit formation of a task force to investigate the issue of articulation. At issue is whether there is anything that can and should be done on a professional level to make it easier or students to move between and among programs. Even if it were possible to garner agreement on a common yardstick for measuring Japanese proficiency, one doubts that the profession would want to dictate to such a degree what is taught in the individual classroom. This ties in directly to the contemporary controversy over national standards for education.

A related, but different question is that of the articulation of American students who go abroad and are tested in radically different modalities. This is a problem that faces not only students of Japanese. It has been raised at meetings of foreign language faculty from languages as diverse as Russian, Chinese, and Japanese. "Proficiency" as such has not made the impact outside the United States that it has within. We are faced with the question, therefore, of what role preparing students for study abroad has in our language programs. Granted that a small percentage actually goes abroad to study, one goal is always to increase that percentage. To what extent should the training that students get in America be geared toward a potential study (and assessment) experience abroad?

As educators we often feel that the connection between what is discussed in the arena of educational theory and decided as public policy on the one hand and what happens in actual classroom practice on the other is tenuous at best. Controversy over the construct of "language proficiency" notwithstanding, the notion of oral proficiency has given the language teaching enterprise a tool that allows it to make important connections between teaching and testing, between educational reform and day-to-day classroom management. The process of foreign language assessment has made important progress precisely because there is at least provisional agreement on what the broad goals for teach-

ing are. We should be encouraged at the progress we have made using the tools at hand, and attempt to engage all of those who are affected in a dialogue that will expand the boundaries of language assessment.

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