

Second-Language Curriculum Models and Program Design: Recent Trends in North America

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The advent of “communicative” second-language teaching has implications not only for classroom methodology but also for curriculum development. In North America, models for program design are exemplified by the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines and the Canadian National Core French Study. The American model is based on pre-established descriptions of language proficiency for different levels of a sequential program. The Canadian model adopts a multidimensional approach emphasizing content more than terminal outcomes, and envisages the integration of language and a cultural component. Despite similar didactic principles, the two models differ as products of their respective educational value systems.

L'enseignement de type “communicatif” d'une langue seconde a des incidences non seulement sur la méthodologie employée dans la salle de cours, mais aussi sur le développement curriculaire. En Amérique du Nord, les modèles en matière de conception de programmes sont illustrés par les *American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines* et le *Canadian National Core French Study/Étude nationale sur les programmes de français de base*. Le modèle américain repose sur des descriptions préétablies de compétence linguistique pour les différents niveaux d'un programme séquentiel. Le modèle canadien adopte une approche multidimensionnelle qui privilégie davantage le contenu que les résultats finals et envisage l'intégration de la langue et d'une composante culturelle. En dépit de principes didactiques semblables, les deux modèles diffèrent et sont en cela des produits de leurs systèmes respectifs de valeurs en matière d'éducation.

Second-language curriculum development has become increasingly complex since the advent of “communicative language teaching” during the 1980s. In various countries, school curricula increasingly take into account learners' present or predicted communication requirements, the kinds of things they are likely to want to say, read, or write in the target language. “Communicative intentions” replace grammatical forms, and “communicative competence” is “the overriding objective” of instruction (Hessische Kultusminister, 1980, p. 23). The Scottish modern language syllabi that evolved from an earlier pilot known as “GLAFLL”¹ provide for the simulation of authentic language-using situations with ongoing pupil input (Scottish Examination Board, 1987).

North American criticism of earlier programs noted their failure to promote communicative competence, and low levels of pupil interest as evidenced by take-up and drop-out figures. Solutions have been sought in administration (for example, the lowering of starting grades for French in Canada), in the American "FLES" (Foreign Language in the Elementary School) movement, and in curriculum development. During the 1980s, Canadian ministries of education sought through their curriculum guidelines to provide comprehensive program models, redefining their rationale, long-term goals, and specific learning objectives (Diffey, 1991). For all their merits, such models are intended for regional educational contexts; "micro-level" planning has led to wide diversity among provincial guidelines.

On the "macro-level," two major initiatives have influenced language-teaching programs in the United States and Canada. The first is the publication of the Proficiency Guidelines of the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the basis of the so-called "proficiency movement."² Proficiency has affected Canadian second-language curricula.³ The other important initiative in the area of FSL, is the publication of the Canadian National Core French Study (NCFS), founded on the model of a "multidimensional curriculum."⁴

Both documents offer sophisticated curriculum models illustrating solutions to such pedagogical problems as the role of "content." I say "content" rather than "context," which has special connotations in linguistics, although both words are often used interchangeably. The underlying belief, slowly gaining currency, is that a second or foreign language may be taught from the perspective of the message, not just the medium, and that learning may be helped if pupils meet content of practical life value. In curriculum guidelines, content usually includes both language elements and general topics ("health," for example) at various levels. The task of fleshing these out then falls to the writer, whether in a school system or a publishing company.⁵ Increasingly, however, that writer may require guidance where the final purpose is to do more than saturate the learner with particular grammatical forms.

PROFICIENCY-BASED LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION: THE ACTFL GUIDELINES

The movement toward communicative language teaching (CLT) in the United States, as in Canada, can be seen as a reaction to an earlier behaviourist methodology known as "audiolingualism." Through repetition and manipulation exercises, teaching emphasized the fixing of language forms rather than what might be done with them. CLT promised to restore the balance between language usage and language use. Savignon (1983) was particularly influential in applying the construct of "communicative competence" for formulating learning objectives (1983). According to Canale and Swain (1980), these go beyond formal accuracy ("linguistic competence") to include social appropriateness ("sociolinguistic competence"), global com-

munication above the single sentence level (“discourse competence”), and strategies for conveying meaning despite limitations in vocabulary and expression (“strategic competence”). However, these general objectives do not offer much guidance as to language complexity, content topics, and sociocultural applications at different levels. The intent of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines was to provide a yardstick for instructional planning and progress assessment by establishing “a hierarchy of global characterizations of integrated performance in speaking, listening, reading and writing” (Omaggio, 1986, p. 433). “Proficiency profiles,” thus formulated, classify learners on a scale from “novice” through “intermediate” and “advanced” to “superior.” Since each level is characterized by greater complexity of language and content, “it becomes relatively more difficult and more time consuming to move from level to level as one ascends the scale” (Liskin-Gasparro, 1984, p. 477). Language learning is broadening, as symbolized by an inverted pyramid (Alberta Education, 1988, p. 13; Medley, 1985, p. 18). The underlying principle of a proficiency-based program is represented by the “functional trisection,” a model for integrating the objectives of function, context (content), and formal accuracy at any level (Medley, 1985, p. 19).⁶ As examples, Omaggio’s (1986, p. 181) “curricular planning guides” offer specifications for “content” (such as transportation), “function” (for example, “can participate in short conversations”), and “accuracy” (for instance, “very basic vocabulary related to content areas listed”).

In the view of its exponents, the importance of proficiency as an “organizing principle” of planning and evaluation derives from its descriptive and predictive power for comparing different programs and methodologies (Omaggio, 1983, p. 330).

There is scarcely any area of the field in the United States that has not been affected by this attempt to institute a national metric based on demonstrated proficiency in the functional use of an FL, and, more importantly, to define achievement in language instruction in terms of functional use rather than exposure to or command of a specific body of material. (Valdman, 1988, p. 121)

Proficiency-based programs have developed in universities (Freed, 1983) and in schools (Cole & Miller, 1985; Grittner, 1985; Iowa State Department of Education, 1986; Porter, 1987) on the belief that programs in a “thoughtfully engineered framework” come from “knowing *in advance* the why (goals), the what (functions, content, context), the how well (student outcomes).” Lack of these would be “akin to a carpenter standing in front of a tree with a hatchet in his hand and maintaining that he was out to build a cathedral” (Medley, 1985, p. 14; emphasis in the original). Proficiency course descriptions specify

(1) the reasons why we teach language (our philosophy or rationale); (2) what our students will derive from the study of language (our goals); (3) the specific capabilities the students will develop as a result of instruction (our objectives, or

student outcome statements); (4) the scope and sequence of our programs; and (5) the articulation of content and skills within our programs. (Medley, p. 15)

However, when it comes to proposing content topics, the proficiency guidelines are short on specifics. Medley notes, as an afterthought:

As one identifies functions and structures, it is also important to maintain an awareness of the different contexts that are involved in language instruction. . . . The guidelines mention broad topics, like current events, autobiographical information, survival needs, and others. But as curriculum design progresses, the topics must become more clearly identified. (p. 33)

The Iowa Department of Education guide suggests under the head “Typical Contexts” various content areas for the lower levels, such as family life or community and neighbourhood, simply stating that “at the upper levels content is virtually limitless” (Iowa State Department of Education, 1986). Medley suggests that in practice much of the content of a proficiency-based program will be supplied by course texts (p. 19). A report on the adaptation of the guidelines in Indiana also states:

Since the contexts identified . . . are suitably broad (the “world” of the target language, leisure time, family and home, school and education, travel and transportation, meeting personal needs, world of work, fine art, history, and politics), they are eminently adaptable to textbooks currently being used. (Government of Indiana, 1986, p. 17)

Teachers may welcome restoration of the course text to a dominant role in class, but such texts are based on teaching methodologies not necessarily consistent with current thinking.

The initial impetus behind the proficiency movement came from the 1979 report of President Carter’s Commission on Foreign Languages and International Studies, which was highly critical of language teaching in the United States and saw a threat to national interests. However, the proficiency model has since drawn criticism on pragmatic grounds. A “pragmatic” approach to second-language curriculum development accommodates various organizational and human constraints easily ignored under a theoretical construct (Johnson, 1989, pp. 15–18). Chastain (1989) reports a wide variety of operational definitions of proficiency among teachers and concludes that such definitions should “be practical to the extent that teachers can incorporate them into the administrative framework of their specific instructional settings” (p. 48). “[T]he use of proficiency tests may produce language programs that focus entirely on the tests and that even redesign their curricula and instruction to match the ACTFL guidelines” (p. 50). Liskin-Gasparro (1984) similarly claims that “the pressure to ‘teach to the test’ can assist the teacher in developing a more proficiency-oriented program” (p. 485). Teachers can and do improve proficiency ratings by teaching to the

test, to the extent of achieving apparent changes of level in considerably shorter periods of time than would “normally” occur (Loughrin-Sacco, 1990). Often lost sight of is the guidelines’ intended role in the normative evaluation of programs and learner progress. Even here they are open to criticism since they are based on performances observed in many different settings (Valdman, 1988, p. 125). Presumably, if over a period of time sufficient numbers fail the tests, either the proficiency levels themselves would have to be redefined or the tests redesigned.⁷

The danger facing curriculum writers thus becomes that of circularity. Specific target behaviours are established, taught, and tested on the basis of empirically derived norms having validity of their own. To what extent, then, should programs emphasize preconceived terminal behaviours, and to what extent should they “evolve,” say, through ongoing negotiation of topics deemed valuable to participants? Proficiency planning assumes that a rough level equivalency for language and content can be established, but this may be open to question in view of the variety of age, maturity, and motivation of language learners. Language “limited” in function and accuracy may be used, albeit with difficulty, by speakers at conferences for topics requiring complexity of thought and argument. Proficiency descriptions, both multifaceted and vertical (sequential), imply that learners advance evenly in each major component of communication (language control, complexity of message, and so on). This has led to a psycholinguistically controversial claim, namely that fluency should be delayed in the interest of accuracy if “superior proficiency” is the ultimate goal of the program (Higgs & Clifford, 1982; Omaggio, 1983). Savignon (1985) sees this “curious” suggestion as advocating a two-track approach to language teaching, with a fast but terminal “communicative track” running beside the slower “linguistic competence” route reserved for future professionals (p. 1005).

How valuable are proficiency guidelines for learner motivation? In the lower levels especially Galloway (1987) remarks that

descriptions at times focus less on what the individual does and more on what the individual does not do yet. . . . Because of this focus on deficiencies the guidelines are inadequate as program goal statements. In the world of the classroom, one does not work toward a negative destination nor, if the destination is realizable, does one strive to get only part of the way there. (p. 37)

Such descriptions have been called “profiles of incompetence” (Richards, 1984, p. 13). A useful comparison might be made with the Scottish experience mentioned earlier (Clark, 1987). In the original version of “GLAFFL” syllabus content was essentially that proposed by the Council of Europe (see note 6) and was to be covered through successive levels or “stages.” This approach was later modified by means of a two-dimensional approach combining linguistic-functional and experiential-communicative activities and making extensive use of pen-friends, exchanges, and the like. Once in place, programs developed through their own momentum, within the broad

specifications of a “light syllabus” (Clark, p. 52). Ongoing, sensitive teacher involvement was particularly crucial in the setting of performance levels:

It has . . . seemed better to leave it to the teacher’s judgment, on the basis of certain criteria, to determine whether a pupil’s performance for a particular stage was “good,” “satisfactory,” or “rather weak.” . . . Many different sets of performance can then be judged “good,” in which excellence in one dimension may compensate for weakness in another. (Clark, p. 170)

From this perspective, instructional objectives that are both attainable and potentially stimulating for the learner seem more useful than a prescriptive hierarchy of predetermined outcomes.

CANADIAN TRENDS: THE IMPORTANCE OF “IMPORTANT CONTENT”

Canadian second-language curricula since the early 1980s have also been designed with communicative teaching in mind. In FSL, distinctively national requirements flow from the official policies of bilingualism and biculturalism. Meanwhile, provincial autonomy has led to duplication and fragmentation, undermining to some extent the advantages of a well-defined and well-funded national purpose.

Ironically, the success of French immersion in promoting communicative competence may have contributed to the neglect of the core programs (Stern, 1982). Certainly advances in this area have been slow. The first communication-oriented guidelines for core FSL appeared in Quebec (Ministère d’éducation du Québec, 1982–83). They were strongly influenced by developments in Europe, in particular the replacement of the grammatical syllabus by the functional syllabus as the “unit of organization” (Johnson, 1982, p. 55) in the planning of programs. The language objectives look radically different from those of contemporary guidelines in other provinces, for example Ontario’s *French Core Programs 1980*, which lists two hundred grammatical structures in approximate order of instruction (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1980; compare note 5). However, the Quebec curriculum is less informative when it comes to content. A functional syllabus does little in itself to advance beyond the traditional one-dimensional analysis of the forms of the target language. All that has changed is that the analysis focuses on functions instead of forms. It is true that a functional objective such as “asking for a service” implies content in a way that “mastering the possessive” does not, but topics and situations appropriate for practicing this function still have to be specified. The Quebec model unintentionally suggested an analytical more than an holistic approach. As a consultant, I recall worries that the emphasis on functions might encourage a “tourist phrase-book” style of presentation. Furthermore, where grammatical objectives often suggest a logical sequence, such as present tense before past, there is no way of predicting whether formulae for asking the way when lost in a city are easier or more useful than ways of introducing oneself.

Multidimensional programs integrating three (Allen, 1983) or four (Stern, 1983) content areas are a significant advance, offering combined analytical and holistic experience of language. Multidimensionality more adequately conveys “the social nature and cultural embeddedness of language” and accommodates content of greater intrinsic value for the student (Stern, 1983, p. 123). Following the four-dimensional “Stern model,” the National Core French Study integrates four major areas or “syllabi”: the Language Syllabus, encompassing both structural and functional aspects of the French language; the Communicative/Experiential Syllabus, which specifies “fields of experience” for project-based language activities; the Culture Syllabus, containing topics and applications for the development of sociocultural knowledge and awareness; and the General Language Education syllabus, dealing with such topics as the nature and structure of language and language learning strategies. Material from each syllabus is taught in the target language. On the integrating principle, objectives from one syllabus may be achieved through the content of another. The Language Syllabus specifies objectives but not content, provided, for example, by the cultural syllabus. The trivial topics so often found in language courses are thus replaced by “worthwhile content” (Stern, Balchunas, Hanna, Schneidemann, & Argue, 1980, p. 7).⁸ This continues a trend in Canadian FSL curricula, beginning with immersion, toward “content-based” programs of higher surrender value for the learner, what Swain and Lapkin (1990) have called the “two for one” principle.

THE CASE OF CULTURE

Culture provides a particularly rich source of “worthwhile content” and has come to be viewed as an essential rather than incidental component of the second-language curriculum. Proficiency-based instruction stresses the importance of language acquired “in a culturally authentic context” (Omaggio, 1986, p. 407). When language proficiency guidelines were developed, parallel guidelines for cultural proficiency were also contemplated. However, it became apparent that merely listing isolated characteristics for various levels could not supply the basis of a “real progression” (Omaggio, 1986, p. 372). “While the language guidelines reflect an assumption of a progression of increasingly complex linguistic and cognitive skills, the culture guidelines reflect no such hierarchical skills arrangement” (Galloway, 1987, p. 70).

According to Omaggio’s (1986, pp. 372–373) model for acquiring cross-cultural awareness, the learner advances from the novice stage of superficial or stereotypical information to the superior one of empathetic awareness. Richards’ description of language proficiency guidelines as “profiles of incompetence” may apply equally to cultural proficiency. Allen (1985) suggests selecting and sequencing cultural objectives in terms of “information, experience and authenticity,” in effect a “cultural trisection” (pp. 152–154). For the beginner, information takes the form of isolated

facts, experienced in limited interactions. At the other end of the scale, the advanced learner has mastered patterns of social behaviour and thought, can describe abstract cultural phenomena, and displays social and professional competence. Allen notes her information component is “not without problems” and suggests cultural content might be more closely associated with “particular topics in cultural study or with particular aspects important to the study of a particular culture.” However, she rejects the view that “culture should be *the central part* of second language course content” (p. 145; emphasis in the original). Her own prototypal culture-based syllabus for introductory French (pp. 162–165) adopts the more cautious approach of “grafting” culture onto language (p. 157).

The Canadian NCFs moves significantly closer to the particularity Allen advocates, since a quarter of the objectives and a third of the topics derive from authentic sociocultural contexts, predominantly the geopolitical reality of Canada. The Culture Syllabus classifies content in five areas: the Francophone presence in North America and the world, the historical context of the Francophones, regional phenomena of the French language, everyday lives of Francophones, and Canadian bilingualism (LeBlanc & Courtel, 1990). The principles of sequencing resemble those of such content-based disciplines as social studies—simple to complex, near to far, and individual to collective. The underlying assumption is that in a core program cultural topics can fulfill a role similar to that of the general curriculum in immersion and will provide appropriate content for acquiring both language and cultural proficiency. The national social and cultural context readily and non-arbitrarily present such topics, thus allowing for Allen’s “authenticity.”

FUTURE PROSPECTS

In the North American models discussed, second- and foreign-language programs envisage the development of communicative competence, either in terms of complexity and context of language use at various levels, or within content parameters for communication in the target language (French). The difference in emphasis and approach is the difference between two educational value systems. One has traditionally defined excellence in terms of standards and accountability and requires an adequate construct for planning and evaluating learning in a variety of educational contexts. The other is coloured by certain historically rooted national agenda that readily suggest specific content for the teaching of a language and a culture. Programs conceived with the goal of making learners receptive have their own internal justification and may not have to affirm their place in the curriculum by setting up and attaining uniform terminal outcomes.

The two models are not mutually exclusive, since both accept that language is acquired through meaningful use in various social and cultural situations. It is, moreover, easy to see conceptual and pragmatic shortcomings in the proficiency movement. But apart from two secondary pilot

modules to date and signs of some influence in commercially produced materials, the NCFS is still little more than a first blueprint. Its potential is unrealized, despite Johnson's (1989) judgment that it offers "a near perfect example of coherent language curriculum development" (p. xx).

Although these models respond to different demands, how can we reconcile such "top-down" concerns as standards and program equivalency with participants' (students' and teachers') needs for personal "investment" in curriculum? Should language instruction emphasize content more sharply than in the past?

The future foreign language curriculum must stress the learning of content as much as it does the learning of form. Culture must extend beyond its integration of the core materials, the drills and exercises, the readings, and the communication activities to the point where there exists alongside the linguistic syllabus an explicit cultural syllabus that includes cultural knowledge about a wide representation of communities speaking the foreign language, including minorities in the United States. (Lafayette & Strasheim, 1981, p. 32)

This prediction of future trends in the United States may go some way toward endorsing the Canadian trend to "language through content," both in immersion and in the integrated syllabi of the NCFS. Where the 1980s were heralded as the decade of communicative and interactive methodologies in language teaching (Alatis, Altman, & Alatis, 1981), the 1990s may be the decade in which inquiry moves to appropriate content areas where methodologies might be applied. As one example, if the NCFS initiative yields a measure of success, its usefulness for the design of other language teaching programs may well offer a promising area for future research.⁹

NOTES

- ¹ "Graded Levels of Achievement in Foreign Language Learning." See Clark (1987) for an account of this project.
- ² The following events and publications have been particularly influential in the development of proficiency language teaching in the United States: *ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines* (1982); A. Omaggio, *Proficiency-oriented classroom testing* (Centre for Applied Linguistics, 1983); T. Higgs, *Teaching for proficiency: The organizing principle* (Lincolnwood: Nat. Textbook, annual review of the ACTFL, 1984); Northeast Conference on the theme *Proficiency, curriculum, articulation: The ties that bind* (1985); *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* (1986); Omaggio (1986).
- ³ For a good example of an attempt to harness the proficiency model to curriculum planning in Canada, see Alberta Education (1988). New Brunswick introduced an FSL "proficiency rating scale" for grades 10 to 12 in September 1991.
- ⁴ The *National Core French Study/Étude nationale sur les programmes de français de base* is published by the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers (LeBlanc et al., 1990). For commentaries and an account of its

- development, see articles in the *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 47 (October 1990). The concept of the “multidimensional” or “multiple-focus” second-language (or foreign-language) curriculum originates in the “Boston paper” developed at the 1980 ACTFL conference on national priorities in foreign-language teaching. The paper and working document based upon it (Stern, 1983) amount to a blueprint for the NCFS.
- ⁵ “Looking at the *French Core Programs 1980* [Ontario Ministry of Education, 1980] . . . one finds an excellent chart for the presentation of structures, a very comprehensive list of language forms, as well as generalizations or concepts, and vocabulary topics. . . . All of this constitutes the first stage of syllabus design. But the material needs to be worked into units of some sort, since it is far from classroom ready” (Yalden, 1984, p. 406).
- ⁶ In language curriculum development, the terms “function” and “functional” have come to refer to learning objectives that emphasize the ability to perform certain communicative acts such as “introducing oneself,” “initiating a conversation,” “asking the way,” and so forth. Such objectives rather than the more traditional grammatical ones provide the structure of the “functional” (or “notional-functional”) syllabus that was developed by the Modern Languages Project of the Council of Europe (Van Ek, 1976) and that I mention in connection with Canadian second-language curricula.
- ⁷ Proficiency descriptions are seen as “experientially, rather than theoretically, based; that is, they *describe* the way language learners and acquirers typically function along the whole range of possible levels of competence, rather than *prescribe* the way any given theorist *thinks* learners ought to function” (Omaggio, 1983, p. 331; emphases in the original). Expectations are subject to long-term amendment.
- ⁸ On the content of typical SLT programs, compare Clark (1982): “The triviality of much of the subject matter of language courses past and present gives cause for concern” (p. 5).
- ⁹ An example of an adaptation of the NCFS model to the teaching of German in a university setting is described by Enns-Connolly (1990).

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