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## ***Theory and Practice in Government Language Teaching***

**Frederick H. Jackson & Marsha A. Kaplan**

**Foreign Service Institute**

**United States Department of State**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

The Foreign Service Institute was established in 1947 - more than 55 years ago-as the training arm of the State Department. In our talk this morning, we would like to present our view of what has been learned from FSI's half century of practical experience preparing thousands of adult learners to carry out complex, professional tasks in foreign languages. The core of our presentation will be twelve pragmatic lessons that we have learned about language learning and instruction at FSI. Although most of the observations are consistent with much recent theory, in some cases they are in conflict.

At present, in the Language School, we teach 63 languages - from world languages like Spanish and Russian to national languages such as Turkish, Urdu and Thai, to regional languages like Pashto, and Kurdish.

We train a variety of different students: from officers new to the Foreign Service to Ambassadors, clerical staff, to security personnel. Most of these students come to us having a specific language requirement. We also train adult family members.

Our students are selected for skills pertinent to the identified needs of the foreign affairs community - but not necessarily for strong language aptitude.

Our students are typically very **highly motivated**: They know that proficiency in the language they are studying is crucial to their success in their jobs - and therefore to their competitiveness within the Foreign Service.

Learning a language to the levels that the Foreign Service demands requires a very great deal of hard work. To get to the threshold level for most overseas jobs-requires a good learner starting from scratch in Spanish or Dutch about 600 hours of class-time, and almost the same outside of class in guided independent study. To get to the same level in such languages as Thai, Hungarian, or Russian requires 1100 hours. Japanese, Chinese, Korean or Arabic requires more than 2000 hours in class.

At FSI, all instructors are native-born speakers of the languages they teach and grew to adulthood within the culture. Many are professionally trained as language teachers. However, all have to learn how to teach in the special institutional context of FSI.

Mary McGroarty (2003) has recently described teaching at an institution like FSI as a "best case teaching scenario.[with] "small classes of well educated adult students who study languages to further their career goals, trained teachers with native speaker proficiency in the language of instruction, and systematic assessment." In a sense, FSI is a near optimal lab for testing the claims of classroom-based Second Language Acquisition theory and research.

From FSI's earliest days our language training has been influenced by the findings of research and the theoretical insights that derive from them. However, the consistent test for FSI of all such insights has been whether or not they actually improve the ability of the learners to learn to use the language. The most important measurement has always been reports from the embassies and other posts about what our graduates can and cannot do with the language in the field.

The term "language proficiency" was first established at FSI. For us, it refers to **the ability to use language as a tool to get things done**. Language training programs at FSI are accountable for developing pre-specified proficiency levels in our students in as short a period of time as possible. The accountability goes to whether graduates of our programs can use the language to carry out the important and complex work for which they are responsible. If, for some reason, they cannot do that work, the FSI program heads will hear about it in no uncertain terms. Language educators at FSI get direct feedback from our clients and stakeholders. When a dissatisfied cable comes to us from post, it demands our attention.

Our programs are not given indefinite amounts of time in which to prepare learners to do their work. For example, students in the Russian program that Marsha Kaplan directs are expected to progress in ten months from no functional ability in the language to the ability to read almost any professionally-relevant text and discuss in detail with a Russian-speaker any and all implications of that text for Russian-American cooperation. Ten months of intensive language study may seem like a long time, but, in fact, it is very

short when the scope of the goal is understood. There is no time to waste with non-productive activities.

The more than 60 FSI language programs, then, are for us the proving grounds for the usefulness of any theory about language learning and teaching. The crucial question has been and will continue to be whether any innovation, in fact, improves the speed with which our learners can meet the proficiency standards or enhances in some way the quality of the language skill that they do achieve. We at FSI have learned some things that we believe matter in helping adult learners to develop a high level of proficiency in languages in a short specified period of time. In our presentation, we present twelve of the lessons which we have learned.

## **Lesson 1: Mature adults *can* learn a foreign language well enough through intensive language study to do professional work in the language (almost) as well as native speakers.**

The goal of language training for FSI students is typically General Professional Proficiency in Speaking and Reading. This level is approximately equivalent to "Superior" on the scale used by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. The mean age of language students at FSI is now at about 40. In recent years, the average FSI student has begun class knowing 2.3 non-English languages, but, even so, most of them enroll as absolute beginners in the language to which they are assigned. This is especially true of students in languages other than French, Spanish, German, or Russian. Despite this, approximately 75% of FSI's full-time students achieve or exceed their proficiency goals. This is due both to the characteristics of the programs and to the abilities of the learners.

Research on aging has shown that short term memory and hearing acuity do decline with age, but in FSI's students these losses are often compensated for by increased experience, which actually helps in the language learning process. The result is that skilled adults learn some aspects of the foreign language better and much faster than children. They can do this because they have learned how to learn.

We were encouraged by a 2002 article in which Marinova-Todd, Marshall and Snow argue-and we quote-"The misconception that adults cannot master foreign languages is . erroneous." The authors point out that there are many cases where adults have developed foreign language competency that rivals that of natives, and they urge SLA researchers to investigate such successes. We have met many such gifted individuals at FSI, among both our students and our faculty.

While it is true that most adults are not good at eliminating accent and developing truly native-sounding speech, a few **are** able to do that. More important from our very **practical** perspective, where the goal is the ability to use language as a tool to get things done, native accent is normally not a criterion for success (although intelligibility certainly is). As Kachru (1994), Sridhar (1994) and Firth and Wagner (1997) have pointed out, mainstream Second Language Acquisition researchers have had the "fundamental misconception"-the term is Kachru's-that the target of foreign language learning is "to use [the language] in the same way as monolingual native speakers" (Kachru 1994:797). That is not true in the State Department, and, we suspect, not true for most other students, either.

## Lesson 2: "Language Learning Aptitude" varies among individuals and affects their classroom learning success (but at least some aspects of aptitude can be learned).

Any language teachers anywhere in the world know language aptitude when they see it: some people **are much** better classroom language learners than others. Moreover, in intensive language programs such as FSI's, these differences can become magnified very quickly.

By aptitude, we are not referring to any theoretical construct. We mean the observable fact that some people know how to learn a language very efficiently in a classroom and others do not, regardless of the effort they may put in.

Language Learning Aptitude is not a single unitary trait, but a constellation of traits. Some aspects of aptitude can be measured. Madeline Ehrman's research has revealed that measured aptitude is still the second best **single** predictor of learning success at FSI - next to previous learning success - especially at the extremes of the scale. (Ehrman, 1998)

While **research** has been somewhat equivocal on the question whether language aptitude is innate or potentially subject to change, it is clear to **us** that at least some of the skills and awareness that underlie aptitude **can** be learned. As adults learn more about languages and how to learn them, they can get better at it. We have observed some clear instances of this.

It is also possible for a flexible language program to adapt to learners' traits so as to minimize language learning weaknesses and maximize learning strengths *for particular learners*. That is, we might say that some learners, in a sense, demonstrate higher "aptitudes" in one kind of language program than in another.

Finally, motivation, self-discipline, power of concentration and confidence of success may be equally or more important than cognitive aptitude in the achievement of language learning success, or in the lack thereof (cf. Marinova-Todd, Marshall and Snow 2002).

### Lesson 3: There is no "one right way" to teach (or learn) languages, nor is there a single "right" syllabus.

Students at FSI and in other government language training programs have learned and still do learn languages well under a range of learning conditions and types of curricula. As Spolsky 1988:383 writes, "Any intelligent and disinterested observer knows that there are many ways to learn languages and many ways to teach them, and that some ways work with some students in some circumstances and fail with others.."

It is also clear that learners' needs change over time-sometimes rapidly. Types of activities that worked very well for certain learners at an early stage in a course may be almost completely useless a couple of weeks later for those same learners (Larsen-Freeman 1991: 336-37). At the same time, the lesson plan that works beautifully for one class may not work well at all for another class that is at the same stage. Learning is more efficient when the focus is on providing each **learner** with what he or she needs in order to learn right **now**, not on following an established curriculum.

A generalization that **can** be made here is that there is a need for changes of pace in long-term language training. This is one reason why immersions and excursions are so valuable for learners at the advanced levels-they afford the learners the opportunity to try out their language skills in new contexts. Especially in long-term language training where learners typically encounter extended plateaus in learning, such breaks in the routine can re-energize and refocus the learners.

Explicit grammar instruction of some kind is helpful for efficient language learning by most people-and essential for many. We do not mean the learning of formal grammar rules necessarily, although as Rod Ellis (2002) has recognized, some of the most brilliant adult language learners will demand such rules. But most adults are helped by having the form, meaning and use of grammatical patterns and paradigms pointed out to them so that they can focus on them. A broad overview of the grammatical system early in a course also appears to make language learning more efficient for our adult students: creating awareness of forms and functions to be learned that learners can anticipate as they move through the course.

## Lesson 4: Time on task and the intensity of the learning experience appear crucial for efficient learning.

Language learning is not an effortless endeavor for adults (or for children). For the great majority of learners, learning a language rapidly to a high level requires a great deal of memorization, analysis, practice to build fluency, and--of course--functional and meaningful language use. Learning as quickly as possible to speak and understand a language **automatically** in a variety of situations requires intensive exposure to and interaction with that language. At FSI, it requires most adults at least five class hours a day for five days a week, plus three or more additional hours a day of independent study.

*Learning a language also cannot be done in a short time.* The length of time it takes to learn a language well depends to a great extent on similarities between the new language and other languages that the learner may know well. The time necessary for a learner to develop professional proficiency in each language-proven again and again over a half century of language teaching-cannot be shortened appreciably. FSI has tried to shorten programs, and it has not succeeded.

*Class size makes a difference.* For rapid learning, basic classroom groupings of six students at lower proficiency in cognate languages like French or Spanish are the maximum. For non-cognate languages and at advanced levels, a class size of three or four is the most efficient. Occasional one-on-one language learning is highly beneficial for almost all learners--it intensifies time on task, increases interaction opportunities with a native speaker, and provides security for learners to try out aspects of the language they are not confident about--but **strictly** tutorial training is **not** the best solution for the majority of learners, who benefit from collaborating and interacting with classmates.

*Focused practice of some kind*, including "drills," appears necessary for almost all language learners to develop confidence and build towards automatic language use.

*Intensive immersion experiences* (in the community or in-country) where only the target language is used, have great pay-off in morale, motivation, perception of skill and stamina in using the language. They appear to have the greatest payoff at upper intermediate to advanced proficiencies, despite what some published research has suggested.

*There is no substitute for simply spending time using the language.* Segalowitz and his colleagues pointed out how crucial to reading ability is the simple fact of doing a lot of reading (e.g., Favreau and Segalowitz 1982). Our experience at FSI indicates

unequivocally that the amount of time spent in reading, listening to, and interacting in the language has a close relationship to the learner's ability to learn to use that language professionally. The Chancellor of the Defense Language Institute recently emphasized a similar point about DLI's students when he said: "The single most significant factor in language acquisition is time on task.

## Lesson 5: A learner's knowledge about *language* affects his/her learning.

All else being equal, the more that learners already know that they can use in learning a language, the faster and better they will learn. The less they know that they can use, the harder the learning will be.

Government language educators are all familiar with the language categories that FSI and the Defense Language Institute have developed and that are summarized in Figure 2 of your handout. The categories indicate gross differences in how hard it is for adult native speakers of American English to learn different languages. For example, FSI's three categories indicate that Spanish-a Category One language-- is among the easier languages for English speakers to learn; Japanese is among the hardest; and Hungarian and Thai are among those in the middle.

*Two things need to be understood about these categories. First*, they are entirely a-theoretical, being based solely on the time it takes our learners to learn these languages. **Second**, the categories do **nonetheless** reflect various parameters of linguistic distance. Simply said, the more commonalities a language shares with English--whether due to a genetic relationship or otherwise--the easier and faster it is for an English speaker to learn that language. (Cf. Child, 2000)

The length of time it takes to learn a language well also depends to great extent on similarities between that language and **any other** languages that the learner knows well. The more dissimilar a new language is--in structure, sounds, orthography, implicit world view, and so on--the longer learning takes.

For knowledge of one language to really be of help in learning another, however, it needs to be at a high level. A government interagency group determined that this kind of advantage kicks in at a 3-level proficiency or better. Below that, it does not appear to make any useful difference.

Nonetheless, it is indisputable that transfer phenomena are important in adult language learning.

Overt declarative knowledge of linguistic and grammatical concepts also appears to help many adult learners to be able to progress faster and more surely. Such concepts may include such basic ones as *subject, predicate, or preposition*, but also more language-relevant concepts like *tone, aspect, palatalization, case, and topicalization*. Knowing such concepts increases the accessibility of such resources as reference grammars, textbooks, and dictionaries, and also serves an important purpose in making the learner aware of types of language phenomena to watch for. Because of this, several FSI language programs have put together short written guides to grammatical terminology and concepts to help learners to tune in to the language.

**Lesson 6: If a learner already has learned another language to a high level, that is a great advantage, but if s/he doesn't know how to learn a language IN A CLASSROOM, that is a disadvantage.**

Prior formal language study makes a difference, no matter how remote. That is, knowing how to learn a language in a formal setting helps the learner, both cognitively and affectively. In contrast, *bilingualism acquired naturally as a child does not, in and of itself, appear to aid in learning a third language in a classroom setting.*

We see individuals on a regular basis who know exactly what **they** have to do in order to learn a new language. Some of them are so good that they are astounding, and yet they are each different. Earl Stevick made this point by describing seven such people--each with very different learning approaches--in his wonderful book *Success with Foreign Languages*.

Richness of background knowledge and experience also appear to have a marked influence on how well and how quickly adults learn a new language. Part of this is probably a matter of having things to talk about. A wonderful teacher whom one of us met upon joining FSI, now retired, said seriously, "This is the greatest job in the world. All I do is spend every day teaching a bunch of very smart and interesting people how to tell me in my language everything that they know!"

**Lesson 7: The importance of "automaticity" in building learner skill and confidence in speaking and reading a language has been undervalued.**

Successful language learning requires "stretching" learners some of the time through "i +1"- type tasks. Yet it is also important to build up processing skills by varying the pace and giving learners some tasks that they can perform easily. This is particularly

important in intensive programs, where students can feel constantly confronted with new aspects of language to deal with.

It is probably for this reason that many of our students desire pattern practice - a technique which has survived along side of Communicative, Task-based, and Natural approaches. We have learned that if an adult says that he needs something in order to learn, the chances are very good that he's right.

Pattern Practice is not the only way of developing automaticity, of course. Nor is it sufficient in itself to accomplish that goal, but it does help many of our learners to begin to develop it.

The importance of promoting automaticity is true for **reading** as well as speaking and listening. Adults need to read considerable amounts of "easy" material in order to build up stamina and to automatize processing skills. Segalowitz and his colleagues have shown us that repeating relatively easy tasks is crucial to developing reading skill. Our work at FSI has also shown that, for an adult, learning to process a completely foreign writing system automatically enough to focus on comprehension appears to take much more time and effort than many reading researchers had once thought. (Cf. Red 2002.) Without a significant degree of automaticity, reading is a painful decoding process, with little cognitive energy available for understanding and interpretation.

**Lesson 8: Learners may not learn a linguistic form until they are "ready", but our experience indicates that teachers and a well designed course can help learners become ready earlier.**

Over the last 15 years, researchers like Long, Chaudron, and others have concluded, partly on the basis of the ground-breaking work on developmental sequences by Pienemann and his colleagues, but also on the indisputable fact that it is not possible to "teach" the complete grammar of any language, that, and I quote Craig Chaudron, "the structural syllabus is intellectually bankrupt". While we understand and we appreciate the reasons for this claim, it is not supported by our experience.

Diane Larsen-Freeman (1991) has written, with regard to "readiness" to learn, "It may not be reasonable for teachers to expect students to master aspects of the language which are too far beyond their current stage of development." With this we completely concur, but our experience **also** is that it is possible for a teacher to increase learners' awareness of aspects of the language that they might not otherwise have attended to. Rod Ellis (1997) has speculated that some explicit instruction of grammatical forms can help learners develop awareness of the forms before they might otherwise do so and thereby become ready to learn them sooner.

We fully agree that it is not possible to present learners with the complete grammatical system of a language, but it **is** possible to describe and present in a sequenced way a very significant core of that system-and doing so helps most adult learners. The kind of "structural syllabus" that we have in mind is **not** one in which learners are expected to "master" an element of the grammar before moving on to a new element, but rather one in which salient aspects of the language are focused upon, practiced, used, and then returned to as often as necessary during the program. Our syllabus is also one that fosters **incidental learning** by each student.

In contrast to Ellis (2002), at FSI, we find more and more that **early** focus on form makes an important difference-not focus on form at the expense of use or meaning-but focus that helps learners to develop awareness of significant aspects of the language which they will need later in order to capture precise distinctions in meaning. For example, English-speaking learners of tonal languages like Thai and Chinese do not attend to phonemic tone distinctions readily unless a "focus on form" has made the distinctions salient. Similarly, in highly inflected languages, such as Russian or Finnish, significant meaning is encoded in affixes at the ends of words and must be attended to. Students learning Russian must literally choose from 144 possible endings for each noun, adjective, demonstrative, and pronoun they wish to utter. In both of these examples, it is **not possible** for the learner **not** to make a choice. To utter any word in Thai entails giving it a tone; to say a noun in Russian requires the choice of a case inflection. Failure to pay attention to such forms in speaking, reading and listening will lead not just to a foreign accent, but to serious misunderstanding.

We fully agree that instructed input does not automatically become learner intake, but without explicit consciousness-raising of formal aspects of the language, those aspects may be learned too slowly-or not at all. Because of FSI's specified time constraints, it just does not work to let structures "emerge" naturally when they want to, as some have appeared to have urged. Henry Widdowson (1982) wrote the following: "The whole point of language pedagogy is that it is a way of short-circuiting the slow process of **natural** discovery and can make arrangements for learning to happen **more easily and more efficiently** than it does in 'natural surroundings.'" (Emphasis added.)

And this leads us to the next point:

**Lesson 9:** In order to attain very high levels of proficiency, learners need to be helped to "notice the gap" between their current production and the speech of more proficient users.

Our experience very much agrees with the findings of research reports of the last 6-7 years that provide strong evidence that a clear "focus on form" is essential to enable adults to achieve the precise and articulate use of language required to participate effectively in academic, professional, and some vocational communication. (See, especially, Hinkel & Fotos 2002:5).

We use several different kinds of activities to encourage focus on form, including translation and transcription asks, comparisons of texts, and direct feedback to the learner. We were impressed by the research by Panova and Lyster (2003) in the most recent TESOL Quarterly which compares the effectiveness of different types of error correction.

This need is especially acute in the training of many "fluent non-beginners" -students who perhaps majored or minored in the language, and/or lived for an extended period in the country and who attained communicative fluency, but without grammatical or lexical accuracy. One typical example is a returned Peace Corps Volunteer who spent 2-3 years using the language in the country and who developed fluency and near native-like idiomaticity. Very often, such individuals do not have the nuanced control of the language necessary for such professional work as explaining American policy, questioning someone in detail, taking part in cultural seminars, or being interviewed by the press. And as a result, their language usage does not have the effect that they require. At the same time because they are recognized as fluent and idiomatic, the need to improve may not be apparent to them. (See Clifford and Higgs.)

In some such cases, we have to, in a sense, help the learner to "take the machine apart and put it back together again." That is-to become sufficiently aware of their production that they are able to notice how it differs from truly professional-level speech. This often also involves needing to speak less fluently at first, in order to-excuse the expression-monitor their output for the needed accuracy. Our observed reality in this important respect directly contradicts Krashen's claims.

**Lesson 10:** A supportive, collaborative, responsive learning environment, with a rich variety of authentic and teacher-made resources, is very important in fostering effective learning.

Madeline Ehrman (1998) has observed that end-of-training comments from students after six to ten months of intensive training at FSI typically mention their teachers as the factor that contributed most to their success in learning. The consistency of such comments is striking. Ehrman writes, "Although [students] often mention as positive forces well-designed textbooks and a suitable curriculum, their true enthusiasm is reserved for their teachers and the relationships the teachers establish with them." The ultimate goal of language training is to develop learner autonomy, so that individuals can use the language effectively outside and after the classroom. Ehrman describes this development as an intensely interpersonal process between teacher and students, which is accomplished through such relationships. "Even gifted learners need supportive teachers or mentors. Few people, including adults, can undertake self-directed learning without encouragement and feedback." The teacher's ability to empathize, help the students manage their feelings and expectations, and tune interventions appropriately to the emotional and developmental states of the learners, are key factors in many successful learning outcomes.

Effective language teachers find ways to provide learners with support and scaffolding when they need it, and to remove the scaffolding when the learners no longer need it. This is true in small ways as well as in large.

The job of language teaching at FSI is to create environments in which each student is able to learn the language efficiently and successfully. If one kind of environment does not work with a particular group of students, then we find another one that does. The model that we try to implement is one in which students, instructors, and program directors take collaborative responsibility for the students' learning.

## Lesson 11: The most effective language teaching responds appropriately to where the learner is and what he or she is trying to do.

Donald Freeman (1989) and other leaders in the field of language teacher education have described language teaching as a series of complex **decision-making** processes based on the teacher's awareness and understanding of what is going on with the learners and the interplay of the teacher's own attitudes, knowledge, and repertoire of skills. In this very helpful model, language teaching is not seen as a "methodology" or a set of "behaviors," but rather the ability to make and carry out appropriate decisions.

To make good decisions, our teachers have to know our students intimately: their jobs, learning preferences, language learning background, and home situation.

To help us in obtaining this information, at the beginning of our courses we administer a series of diagnostic self-validating questionnaires to each learner and then we meet with them individually about the results and discuss what those results might imply about the student's learning style preferences. At the same time, we ask each learner to contact his predecessor at post to find out as much as possible about the nature of the job and to bring that information back to us. Teachers and other members of our staff schedule regular and frequent meetings with each student to discuss learning progress and how the learner feels about her learning.

## Lesson 12: Conversation, which on the surface appears to be one of the most basic forms of communication, is actually one of the hardest to master.

A seasoned Foreign Service officer, who had learned several languages to a high level, was overheard to remark that engaging in conversation--particularly in multiparty settings--was the ultimate test of someone's language ability.

For many of our graduates, a fundamental part of their work involves taking part in ordinary conversations with host country officials and community leaders on a variety of personal and professional topics. Yet of all the tasks graduates carry out at post in the foreign language--articulating policy, conducting interviews, managing offices and local staff--ordinary conversation is the one area of language use in which they almost unanimously claim to experience the most difficulty. They note specifically problems *following* the threads of conversations in multi-group settings such as meetings. Many officers report that they would much rather give a speech or conduct an interview than be the only non-native surrounded by native speakers at a social engagement such as a dinner party or reception (Kaplan, 1995).

Strikingly, such reports seem to contradict some of the assumptions of the language proficiency level descriptions of the Interagency Language Roundtable and ACTFL, which relegate "extensive but casual social conversation" to a relatively low level speaking skill while assigning "professional language use" and certain institutionalized forms of talk to a higher level.

The properties of ordinary social conversation that language learners need to practice include:

- following rapid and unpredictable turns in topic,
- displaying understanding and involvement

- producing unplanned speech
- coping with the speed of the turn-taking
- coping with background noise.

Participants in a conversation must at once listen to what their interlocutor is saying, formulate their contribution, make their contribution relevant, and utter their contribution in a timely way, lest they lose the thread of the conversation - and the attention of their interlocutor. Unlike most other typical face-to-face interactions, no individual can successfully "control" a free-wheeling multi-party conversation.

In a sense, conversation is more about **listening** than about **speaking**. This is especially the case when you are either trying to determine where your interlocutor might stand on certain important issues or are searching for an opportune moment to make a particular point. It is even more the case when you're trying to understand peripheral conversations - what they're talking about in the conversation going on next to you at the table.

Listening is a part of conversation: active listening - showing your interlocutor that you understand, that you hear him, that you care. In the post 9/11 world, it is all the more important for our officers to use FL skills to establish relationships with individuals - not just with institutions - in order to build support overseas for our programs and point of view. Good listening helps to make our message understood by a broader audience.

## CONCLUSIONS

Let us take a couple of moments here to reflect and sum up.

First, we hope that this talk will not be taken as yet another round in a fight between "researchers" and "practitioners." We at FSI value the results of research highly. Indeed, we wish often that we had more time and opportunity in our own programs to investigate formally certain research questions.

We have shared with you here some of what we at FSI have learned from our experience of training American government employees to go overseas and use the languages of those countries to carry out sophisticated professional tasks. One of the prerequisites for us to do that is that we **know** what those tasks are going to be. We are training people to do things in the language that we have researched pretty thoroughly. This, in fact, is one of the reasons that we often talk about "language training" at FSI, rather than "foreign language education." In academic institutions, it is not always possible to identify with such clarity what different learners are going to be doing with the language. Indeed, much of the time, the students may not know

themselves, although we would expect that those of you involved in teaching English for Academic Purposes may find our description of FSI learners rather familiar.

Another probable difference between our context and many of yours is the tremendous urgency that we face with each class in every language to get them to the required proficiency level as quickly as possible and send them on out to post. Every day that our students remain in language class is a day that they are being paid a substantial salary to **get ready** to do their assigned jobs, and not yet to do them. It is for this reason that our classes are as small and intensive as they are.

Despite the existence of differences between our institution and many of yours, though, we would like to suggest that the practical day-to-day, week-to-week, year-to-year experience of training institutions like the Foreign Service Institute offers data that are informative for anyone thinking seriously about adult language learning.

The 12 lessons that we have presented for your consideration here should not be thought of as carved in stone and immutable. We and our Language School colleagues are constantly seeking opportunities to reflect on what we observe in our classes in the light of both current published research and of our own experience.

We hope that our experience under the special FSI conditions may offer you a useful perspective. At the same time, we will continue to look to you (researchers in applied linguistics) to help us to gain new insight into the nature of language use and into language learning and teaching.

Some of the recent research seems especially exciting to us. For example, we have been energized by the recent research into the place of grammar instruction in formal classroom teaching that was kicked off by Doughty and Williams (1998). Another area that shows tremendous promise for us is corpus linguistics and computer-assisted SLA - research based on the actual use of language by native speakers and learners. We are closely following the research by Nick Ellis (2002) that suggests a relationship between observed frequency of language elements in authentic discourse to learners' success in acquisition. Clearly, this work has considerable potential for syllabus design. As corpora are developed for our languages, many of which are not well documented, we will seize upon them.

There are other research areas that we would also like to see explored more, such as:

- The attainment of truly advanced language skills in foreign languages.
- Non-participatory listening comprehension - particularly at higher levels, such as eavesdropping on overheard talk.

- Bottom-up reading of alien orthographies. Well over 60 percent of the languages we teach at FSI do not use the Roman alphabet!
- Transfer phenomena in language learning, not just from L1 to L2, but from L1 and L2 to L3 and L4-and the interrelationship between developmental and transfer phenomena in learning.

The announcement last week of the establishment of the new Center for the Advanced Study of Language at the University of Maryland to work closely with the government community on language learning questions of mutual interest is exciting news for us and, we hope, for the field. The use of research expertise to explore and find answers to practical questions-including those suggested above--is an extremely promising direction for us all.

## ***Theory and Practice in Government Language Teaching***

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1. Mature adults can learn a foreign language well enough to do professional work in the language (almost) as well as native speakers.
2. "Language Learning Aptitude" varies among individuals and affects their classroom learning success (but at least some aspects of aptitude can be learned).
3. There is no "one right way" to teach (or learn) languages, nor is there a single "right" syllabus.
4. Time on task and the intensity of the learning experience appear to be crucial for learning.
5. A learner's knowledge about language affects learning.

6. A learner's prior experiences with learning (languages or other skills) also affect classroom learning.
7. "Automaticity" in building learner skill and confidence in speaking and reading a language is extremely important.
8. Learners don't learn a linguistic form until they are "ready" (but teachers and a well designed course can help learners become ready earlier).
9. In order to attain very high levels of proficiency, learners need to be helped to "notice the gap" between their current production and the speech of more proficient language users.
10. A supportive, collaborative, responsive learning environment, with a rich variety of authentic and teacher-made resources, is very important in fostering effective learning.
11. The most effective language teaching responds appropriately to where the learner is and what he or she is trying to do.
12. Conversation, which on the surface appears to be one of the most basic forms of communication, is actually one of the hardest to master.

**Figure 1.** U.S. Government Proficiency Ratings

Rating	Description
<b>S/R-0</b>	<b><i>No Functional Proficiency</i></b>
<b>S/R-1</b>	<b><i>Elementary Proficiency:</i></b> Able to satisfy routine courtesy and travel needs and to read common signs and simple sentences and phrases.
<b>S/R-2</b>	<b><i>Limited Working Proficiency:</i></b> Able to satisfy routine social and limited office needs and to read short typewritten or printed straightforward texts.
<b>S/R-3</b>	<b><i>General Professional Proficiency:</i></b> Able to speak accurately and with enough vocabulary to handle social representation and professional discussions within special fields of knowledge; able to read most materials found in daily newspapers.

<b>S/R-4</b>	<b>Advanced Professional Proficiency:</b> Able to speak and read the language fluently and accurately on all levels pertinent to professional needs.
<b>S/R-5</b>	<b>Functionally Equivalent to an Educated Native Speaker</b>

**Figure 2.** Approximate Learning Expectations at the Foreign Service Institute<sup>[1]</sup>

Language "categories"	Weeks to achieve Goal	Class hours to achieve goal
<b>Category I: Languages closely cognate with English:</b> French, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian, Spanish, Swedish, Dutch, Norwegian, Afrikaans, etc.	<b>23-24</b>	<b>575-600</b>
<b>Category II: Languages with significant linguistic and/or cultural differences from English:</b> Albanian, Amharic, Azerbaijani, Bulgarian, Finnish, Greek, Hebrew, Hindi, Hungarian, Icelandic, Khmer, Latvian, Nepali, Polish, Russian, Serbian, Tagalog, Thai, Turkish, Urdu, Vietnamese, Zulu, etc.	<b>44</b>	<b>1100</b>
<b>Category III: Languages which are exceptionally difficult for native English speakers to learn to speak and/or read:</b> Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean	<b>88</b> (2 <sup>nd</sup> year is in the country)	<b>2200</b>

<sup>[1]</sup> All estimates in this figure assume that the student is a native speaker of English with no prior knowledge of the language to be learned. It is also assumed that the student has very good or better aptitude for classroom learning of foreign languages; less skilled language learners typically take longer. Although languages are grouped into broad

"categories" of difficulty for native English speakers, within each category some languages are more difficult than others. In the cases of German, Indonesian, Malaysian, and Swahili, learning expectations are between Category 1 languages and Category 2 languages.



