Lessons learned from fifty years of theory and practice in government language teaching

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Introduction. This paper is about the interface among theory, practice, purpose, and result during the fifty years of existence of the Foreign Service Institute (FSI), and the lessons that have been learned from that interface. We will 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 the paper will be ten pragmatic lessons about adult language learning and instruction at FSI. Although most of these lessons will be seen to be congruent with recent thinking in the field of Second Language Acquisition, some of them present a different perspective.[1]

The Foreign Service Institute is the training arm of the State Department. It was established in 1946 to train members of the U.S. diplomatic community to undertake assignments in U.S. embassies, consulates, and other posts overseas. It delivers close to one million hours of training each year to nearly 2,000 language students in more than sixty languages. Its clientele are all adults who will use the foreign language in their government service jobs abroad or their adult dependents. Although FSI's School of Language Studies was established to provide training for State Department employees, in recent years one-third of its students typically come from other government agencies. The school is not authorized to train nongovernment personnel.

From FSI's earliest days, when its staff included the linguists Henry Lee Smith, Charles Ferguson, Carleton Hodge, and Albert Valdman, and the anthropologists Edward Hall and Ray Birdwhistel, its language training has been influenced by the findings of research and the theoretical insights that derive from them. But the test for FSI of all such insights has consistently been whether or not they actually improve the ability of the learners to use the language. The FSI Language Proficiency Test has been one consistent means of measuring our success in training, but the most important measurements have been reports from the embassies and other posts where our graduates serve about what they can and cannot

do with the language in the field. These reports have had the most important influences on FSI's training approaches. That is, when the application of a theoretical principle has failed to result in better learning, as indicated by such reports, either the application or the principle has had to be modified.

The term "language proficiency" was first used in the late 1950s by FSI staff. 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 prespecified proficiency levels in students in as short a period of time as possible. The accountability goes far beyond test scores and end-of-training student evaluations. It 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 their language limitations cause them not to be able to do that work, the FSI program heads will hear about it in no uncertain terms. Language educators at FSI get direct evaluative feedback from our clients and stakeholders. When a dissatisfied cable comes to us from post, it receives our immediate attention.

Almost all FSI language courses would be characterized as *foreign-language training* (FLT), rather than *second-language training* (SLT), in that the training takes place in the United States and there are few if any native speakers of most of the languages easily available outside of the classroom (Nayar 1997). This means that the FSI programs are themselves responsible for providing learners with the very great preponderance of the experiences with the language from which the students must learn. Sridhar (1994) has pointed out that FLT may be the most typical language-learning situation in the world today. Our programs are not given a lengthy period in which to prepare learners to do their work. For example, students in the Russian program are expected to progress in ten months of intensive training 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 relations. 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 considered. There is no time to waste with nonproductive activities.[2]

The proficiency levels that FSI language programs are required to achieve among the learners are based on the *Interagency Language Roundtable* (ILR) *Language Skill Level Descriptions,* which are summarized in table 1. The ILR descriptions characterize six *base levels* of language proficiency (levels 0–5). Intermediate gradations on the scale are indicated by a plus mark; for example, a rating of S-2+ describes a proficiency that is substantially stronger than S-2 but still falls short of the criteria required for a rating of S-3. The six *base levels*, together with the five *plus-levels,* encompass a full range of proficiency from *no proficiency* to *functionally native proficiency.*

The sixty-odd FSI language programs, then, are for us the proving grounds for the usefulness of any theory about language learning and teaching. The crucial

Table 1. U.S. Government Proficiency Ratings

Rating	Description
S/R-0	No functional proficiency
S/R-1	*Elementary proficiency*: Able to satisfy routine courtesy and travel needs and to read common signs and simple sentences and phrases.
S/R-2	*Limited working proficiency*: Able to satisfy routine social and limited office needs and to read short typewritten or printed straightforward texts.
S/R-3	*General professional proficiency*: 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.
S/R-4	*Advanced professional proficiency*: Able to speak and read the language fluently and accurately on all levels pertinent to professional needs.
S/R-5	Functionally equivalent to an educated native speaker.

question has been and will continue to be whether an 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. Working within this system of accountability, 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 this paper, we present ten of the lessons we have learned.

Lesson 1. Mature adults can learn a foreign language well enough through intensive language study to do things in the language (almost) as well as native speakers. The goal of language training for FSI students is typically general professional proficiency (S-3/R-3) in reading and speaking the language, including interactive listening comprehension. This level is approximately equivalent to "superior" on the scale used by the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages. The mean age of language students at FSI is forty-one. Although many of our students know more than one foreign language—in recent

years, the average FSI student begins class knowing 2.3 non-English languages—most of them enroll as absolute beginners in the language they are assigned to study. Despite this obstacle, approximately two-thirds of FSI's full-time students achieve or exceed their proficiency goals, and almost all of the others nearly meet the goals. This is due both to the characteristics of the programs and to the abilities of the learners.

Research on aging has shown us repeatedly that short-term memory declines with age, but in FSI's students this is compensated for by increased experience, which actually helps in the language learning process (see Kulick 1988; Schleppegrell 1987). The result is that skilled adults learn some aspects of languages better and faster than children (Harley 1986). Diane Larsen-Freeman (1991) has quoted Patsy Lightbown as estimating that young children spend 12,000 to 15,000 hours learning their native languages. At FSI, adult students in a forty-four-week language program spend 1,100 hours in training to achieve a highly significant proficiency level in a new language. They can do this because they have learned how to learn.[3]

Most adults are not good at eliminating accents and developing a native-like pronunciation, but, for FSI, as stated earlier, proficiency refers to the ability to use language as a tool to get things done. Native accent is typically not a practical criterion for success in this ability (although intelligibility is). But as Kachru (1994), Sridhar (1994), and others have pointed out, mainstream second-language acquisition (SLA) researchers have the "fundamental misconception"—the term is Kachru's—that the target of foreign language learning is "the idealized native speaker's competence" (Sridhar 1994:801) or "to use [the language] in the same way as monolingual native speakers" (Kachru 1994:797). Once we identify a more pragmatic goal than "native-like" accent or competence, we can perhaps clarify what we mean by adult language learning—and make it appear more like the learning of other complex skills (McLaughlin 1987).

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 teacher anywhere in the world knows that some people are simply much better classroom language learners than others. In intensive language programs such as FSI's, differences among learners can easily become magnified. 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 put in.

Language-learning aptitude is not a single unitary trait, but a constellation of them (Oxford and Ehrman 1992). Some aspects of aptitude can be measured (Harley and Hart 1997; Skehan 1991). Although it was designed more than forty years ago, John Carroll's Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) is still the best

single predictor of learning success at FSI, especially at the extremes of the MLAT scale (Ehrman 1998b; see also Spolsky 1995:132–133).

Although the research is somewhat equivocal on the question of whether language aptitude is innate or potentially subject to change (Harley and Hart 1997), it appears 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 clear instances of this. It is also possible for a flexible language program to adapt to learner traits so as to minimize weaknesses and maximize learning strengths *for particular learners*. That is, we might say that some learners, in a sense, demonstrate higher "aptitudes" in one style of language program than in another.

Finally, from our experience, motivation, self-discipline, and power of concentration may be equally or more important than cognitive aptitude in helping learners achieve language learning success—or in contributing to their failure to succeed.

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 successfully from syllabi based on audio-lingual practice of grammatical patterns, linguistic functions, social situations, task-based learning, community language learning, the silent way, and combinations of these and other approaches. Spolsky (1989: 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." This matches our experience precisely.

It is also clear, as many have reported, 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 "Class B" on Monday morning may not work at all for a "Class C" that is at exactly the same stage in a course. 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 teaching a preset curriculum.[4]

One generalization that *can* be made here is the need for changes of pace in long-term language training. This is why immersions and excursions are so valuable for learners—they afford the learners opportunity to try out their language skills. Especially in long-term training where learners typically encounter the frustrations of extended learning "plateaus," breaks in the routine can re-energize and refocus them.

Another generalization is that some kind of explicit grammar instruction helps most people to learn efficiently. Some focus on an overview of the grammatical system early in a course also appears to make language learning more efficient for FSI's students by creating awareness of form(s) so that learners can attend to them when they are ready. If there is insufficient early focus on form, we have learned that learners may, indeed, risk automatizing ingrained errors (see Higgs and Clifford 1982).

Lesson 4. Time on task and the intensity of the learning experience appear crucial. Language learning is not an effortless endeavor for adults (or for children, for that matter). For the great majority of adult learners, learning a language rapidly to a high level requires a great deal of memorization, analysis, practice to build automaticity, and, of course, functional and meaningful language use. Learning as quickly as possible to speak and understand a language automatically and effectively in a variety of situations and for a range of purposes requires intensive exposure to and interaction with that language. At FSI, we have found that it requires at least four class hours a day—usually more—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 beginning 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 worked (see also lesson 5).

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 other languages and at advanced levels, a class size of four or fewer 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 alone is not the best solution for the majority of learners, who benefit from collaborating and interacting with classmates.[5]

Focused practice of some kind, including "drills," appears necessary for almost all language learners to develop confidence and automatic language use (see also lesson 7).

Immersion experiences, where only the language is used, have great pay-offs in morale, motivation, perception of skill, and stamina in using the language. They appear to have the greatest payoff above the S-2 level. Despite what some

published research has indicated, for example Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsberg (1993), our experience is that in-country immersion is most effective where the learner is at higher levels of proficiency.

There is no substitute for simply spending time using the language. Segalowitz and his colleagues have 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 use that language professionally.

Lesson 5. Learners' existing knowledge about *language* affects their learning. All else being equal, the more that learners already know that they can use in learning a new language, the faster and better they will learn. The less they know that they can use, the harder learning will be.

Government language educators are all familiar with the language categories that FSI and DLI have developed. The categories indicate gross differences in how hard it is for native speakers of American English to learn different languages. For example, FSI's three categories indicate that Spanish—a category I language—is among the easier languages for English speakers to learn; Japanese is among the hardest; and Russian, Hungarian, and Thai are among those in the middle. Table 2 summarizes these differences.

Two things need to be understood about these categories. First, they are based solely on FSI's experience of the time it takes our learners to learn these languages. (FSI recently had to start teaching several languages that had not been taught before in government language schools. We estimated that these would prove to be category II languages, and for the most part we were right. But at least two of them—Georgian and Mongolian—have proven to be harder than that.) Second, the categories reflect various parameters of linguistic distance (see Child 2000). Stated simply, the more commonalties a language shares with English—whether due to a genetic relationship or otherwise—the easier and faster it is for a native English speaker to learn that language.

The length of time it takes to learn a language well also depends to a 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 be a real advantage in learning another, however, it needs to be at a significant level. Thain and Jackson (n.d.) and an interagency group determined recently that this kind of advantage takes effect at a three-level proficiency or better. Below that level, knowledge of a second language does not appear to make any useful difference in acquisition of a related third language.[6]

Table 2. Approximate learning expectations at the Foreign Service Institute

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

Note: 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 general "categories" of difficulty for native English speakers, within each category some languages are more difficult than others. In the cases of Indonesian, Malaysian, and Swahili, learning expectations are halfway between category I languages and category II languages.

It seems to us that such observations lead inevitably to the conclusion that *language transfer* relationships, involving learners' native languages but also other languages that they may know, play complex and highly significant roles in the learning of new languages. As recognized in Pica (1994), Larsen-Freeman (1991), and, especially, Odlin (1989), SLA researchers can no longer reasonably claim that knowledge of other languages has no significant effect on learning a new one.

In addition to the often unconscious effects of transfer-based phenomena, language learning may also be affected by whether the learners possess an overt declarative knowledge of salient linguistic and grammatical concepts. It appears

increasingly clear at FSI that such knowledge helps many learners to be able to progress faster and more surely, and that lack of that knowledge can slow them down. Such concepts may include basic ideas like *subject, predicate, preposition, or sentence,* but also more language-specific concepts like *tone, aspect, palatalization, declension, topicalization,* and so on. Knowing such concepts increases the accessibility of such resources as reference grammars, textbooks, and dictionaries, and also serves an important purpose in making adult learners aware of types of language phenomena to watch for. Because of this, several FSI language programs have recently put together short written guides to grammatical terminology and concepts in order to help learners to tune in to the new language.

Lesson 6. A learner's prior experience with learning (languages or other skills) also affects classroom learning. If learners already have learned a foreign language to a high level, that is a great advantage in learning another language, regardless of whether or not it is related to the first, but if they do not know how to learn a language in a classroom, that is a disadvantage. Prior formal language study makes a difference, no matter how remote it was. 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.*

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 truly astonishing, and they are each different. Earl Stevick emphasized this point in his 1989 book, *Success with Foreign Languages,* by describing seven such superb learners—each with different learning approaches. Programs at FSI need to be flexible enough to make it possible for each learner to progress as rapidly as he or she is able. We have found the following adult learning axiom to be revealing: "If an adult tells you that he needs something in order to learn, the chances are very good that he's right."

Richness of background knowledge and experience appear to have a marked influence on how well and how quickly many adults can learn a new language. Part of this may be a matter of having things to talk about. A wonderful teacher whom one of us met when first arriving at FSI, now retired, used to say seriously, "This [teaching at FSI] 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 everything that they know!" In contrast, both of us have also had experience with suffering learners who complain that they "do not know what to talk about!"

FSI's language teachers are all native speakers of the language they teach and were brought up and educated within a culture where that language was used. But FSI has also found that there is considerable value in having at least one member of the program team who learned the language as an adult and who can therefore serve as a kind of object model for the new learners and can discuss with them the issues that they are wrestling with. For most of FSI's fifty years, such a human resource has been a crucial component of our training model.[7]

Lesson 7. The importance of "automaticity" in building learner skill and confidence in speaking and reading a language is more important than has been recognized by the SLA field over the last two decades. 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 are constantly confronted with new structures and vocabulary to learn. Although techniques associated with audiolingual methodology have been in disrepute since the 1960s and early 1970s, the fact remains that many of our students desire occasional pattern practice. Pattern practice—drill—is a technique that continues to be useful for FSI learners, when used in concert with the various communicative, experiential, and task-based approaches. It is valued not only at the early stages of our students' learning, but at the more advanced as well, as review. In training programs with time-specified outcomes, such as at FSI, the automatization of basic grammatical structures and communicative routines is essential for efficient learning. McLaughlin argued this point nearly twenty years ago. As he explains in a more recent work, "[t]he acquisition of a cognitive skill [results] from the automatization of routines or units of activity. Initially, the execution of these routines requires the allocation of large amounts of mental effort (controlled processing), but repeated performance of the activity leads to the availability of automatized routines in long term memory. The result of this process is that less and less effort is required for automated routines and the learner can devote more effort to acquiring other sub-skills that are not yet automated" (McLaughlin 1987:149). In order to perform higher order communicative skills—such as participating in social conversations (see lesson 10) and other such job-related uses of the target language—our students must produce spontaneously and accurately the relevant grammatical structures and routines of the language.

The importance of promoting automaticity is true for reading as well as speaking. Adults need to read considerable amounts of "easy" material in order to build up stamina and to automatize processing skills. Segalowitz and his collaborators have shown us that iteration of relatively easy processing tasks is crucial to developing reading skill. Red (this volume) 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 (see also Everson, Harada, and Bernhardt 1988 and Bernhardt 1991). Without some degree of automatic processing capability, reading becomes a painful decoding process, leaving the reader with little cognitive energy available for understanding and interpretation.

Lesson 8. Learners may not learn a linguistic form until they are "ready," but FSI's experience indicates that teachers and a well designed course can help learners become ready earlier. The research on natural se-

quences of acquisition by scholars in Europe, Japan, the United States, and Australia is striking and must be attended to by any serious person in the field of language education (e.g., Pienemann 1984). However, to conclude on the basis of such studies, as Craig Chaudron did in a conference with Southeast Asian language educators in January 1994, that "the structural syllabus is intellectually bankrupt" is not supported by the experience at FSI.

Diane Larsen-Freeman (1991: 337) has written, in this respect, "[i]t 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." This makes absolute sense to us, but our experience also is that it is possible for a teacher to increase learners' awareness and create in them what Nina Garrett has referred to as "concepts of grammaticality" for aspects of the language that they might not otherwise notice. Ellis (1993, 1998) has speculated, we believe convincingly, that 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.

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 that they will need later 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 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 examples, it is not possible for the learner to not make a choice. To utter any word in Thai entails giving it a tone; to say a noun in Russian requires attaching a case marker. Failure to pay attention to such forms in speaking, reading, and listening will lead not just to a foreign accent, but to serious misunderstanding.

It is true that instructed input does not automatically become intake, but without explicit consciousness-raising of formal aspects of the language, they 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. Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, and Thurrell (1997) quote Widdowson (1990) approvingly as follows: "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).

Lesson 9. 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 (1998a) 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, "[a]lthough [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. To accomplish this, Ehrman points out that even the very best adult learners need support, feedback, and mentoring at times from their teachers. The teachers' abilities to empathize, help the students manage their feelings and expectations, and tune interventions appropriately to the emotional and developmental state 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. One type of scaffolding that Ray Clifford of the Defense Language Institute believes to be crucial for adult learners is frequent and constructive formative feedback to the learners on the effectiveness of their language use (Clifford, personal communication). Such feedback might take the form of tacit assent to the truth (and intelligibility) of a learner's utterance, but it might also be explicit correction of a pattern of errors or even an extended consultation, depending on what is needed.

Freeman (1989) and other leaders in the field of language-teacher education describe 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 most helpful model, teaching is not a "methodology" or a set of "behaviors," but rather the ability to make and carry out appropriate decisions (see also Jackson 1993).

The job of language teaching at FSI is to find ways 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 have to find another one that does. The model that we try to implement at FSI is one in which students, instructors, and program managers take joint collaborative responsibility for the students' learning.[8]

Lesson 10. 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 and informal conversations with host country officials and busi-

ness, cultural, 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 unanimously claim to experience the most difficulty, noting specifically problems in *following* the threads of conversations in multigroup settings. Many officers report that they would much rather give a speech or conduct an interview than be the only nonnative surrounded by native speakers at a social engagement such as a dinner party or reception (Kaplan 1997).

Interestingly, such reports appear to fly in the face of 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 raising professional language use and certain institutionalized forms of talk to a higher level.

The properties of ordinary social conversation imply that language learners need to practice at least all of the following:

- following rapid and unpredictable turns in topic,
- displaying understanding and involvement,
- producing unplanned speech,
- coping with the speed of the turn-taking, and
- coping with background noise.

Participants in 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. 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, especially when the conversationalist is either trying to determine where the interlocutor might stand on certain important issues or is searching for an opportune moment to make a particular point. A former director of the Foreign Service Institute, Ambassador Lawrence Taylor, used to remark that Foreign Service officers need to be able to conduct what he called "educated assertive gossip"—*educated,* because the officer needs to be informed about (and able to discuss) anything of importance to that culture and time; *assertive,* because the officer must search for opportunities to make points that further the interests of the United States; and *gossip,* because the officer needs to be able to follow the interlocutors into any topic or turn of thought (or joke or tale) that may arise.[9]

FSI has developed a number of tasks and other kinds of activities to help learners develop skills and the "comfort level" that they will need to participate in these conversations (see, e.g., Kaplan 1997), but we recognize that there is still much for us to do.

Conclusions. We hope that the present paper will not be interpreted as yet another blow in some emotional battle between "researchers" and "practitioners" (viz. Clarke 1994). We at FSI value the results of research highly. Indeed, we wish often that we had more time and opportunity to investigate formally certain research questions among our programs.

What we do want to suggest, however, is that the practical day-to-day, week-to-week, year-to-year experiences of training institutions like the Foreign Service Institute offer data that are informative for anyone thinking seriously about language learning. In our half century of language education at FSI, we have moved from "teaching the textbook" to "helping the learner to learn," from a strict diet of sentence-based pattern drills to a range of "communicative activities," from using predominantly teacher-developed materials to a heavy emphasis on authentic or "found" materials and realia. Based on reports from overseas, we believe that we are doing a better job of preparing our students now than we ever did before. Yet, the interesting fact remains that Foreign Service officers used to learn their languages to high levels in the 1960s, just as they do today. For us at FSI, we see our task as one of continuing to tinker so as to try to help more learners to learn to use more languages better, and to listen carefully to what the posts overseas tell us about what we are doing well—and what not so well.

But for our colleagues and friends in the great research institutions, it seems to us that at least part of your tasks ought to be to seek answers to why some of the things we have described are the way they are. Why did learners learn almost as successfully in the early days of the long histories of FSI, the Defense Language Institute, Georgetown's English Language Institute, and other comparable institutions, as they do today, despite the clear increases in the field's understanding of teaching and learning? Do the curriculum and teaching techniques, in fact, not really matter? Why is a class size of more than four too inefficient when we try to teach learners at really high levels of proficiency? Why is an early grammatical overview so helpful to adult learners of languages like Russian or German? Why is, for example, Estonian so much harder for English speakers to learn well than, say, Swahili, even though neither of them is related to English? Why is it really so hard for an adult English reader to learn to read another writing system fluently? There are many more questions like these.

One research question of vital interest to government language educators concerns language maintenance and attrition. The kind of small-group intensive long-term language training that we have described in this paper is extremely expensive. Having made this investment, it is crucial to determine what can be done to maintain the language skills that the graduates have achieved or, preferably, to improve them. Language maintenance at post may not simply be a matter of giving the speakers a set of strategies to use there, but more one of attaining a "critical mass" of language proficiency. Informally, we have observed in the languages that we have worked with that an individual departing for post following training

with a borderline professional proficiency (or lower) is very likely to experience attrition. An individual with a strong professional proficiency (S-3 or S-3+) will maintain or improve proficiency, and with advanced professional proficiency (S-3+ or S-4) will almost certainly continue to improve. Does this "critical mass" vary according to the language, post of assignment, length of tour, nature of job, or characteristics of the individual? Is there anything that language-training programs can do—either in the United States or in the country—to enable all learners to improve their language skills once they get to the country?

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NOTES

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2. Students are assigned to training for specific periods, which are timed so that the students will be ready to take up jobs overseas at the same time that the incumbents of those jobs are rotated elsewhere. If a student is not yet ready linguistically (or otherwise) to fill a vacated position, it creates a "gap" at post. Because they impair an embassy's ability to represent U.S. interests effectively, such gaps cannot easily be tolerated.
3. It is important to note here that FSI's experience shows that not all languages are equally accessible to native speakers of English. For example, although there are many cases on record at FSI of exceptional students starting training as beginners in cognate European languages and achieving proficiencies in the classroom of as high as S-4/R-4 (advanced professional proficiency), similar very high achievements do not occur in such languages as Chinese, Korean, Thai, Finnish, or Arabic. FSI has determined that the achievement of advanced professional proficiency in what Brecht and Walton (1994) refer to as the "truly foreign languages" requires even the most gifted learners to be immersed for an extended time in a culture where the language is spoken.
4. It is sometimes said at FSI that we began forty to fifty years ago with a metaphor of "teaching the course," but that, as the years have passed and we have understood more, we have moved from that concept to "teaching the class," to "teaching the students," to "teaching each student," to the present metaphor of "helping each student find ways to learn."
5. Professor John Rassias of Dartmouth reminded everyone at his presentation at the GURT presession that he has long emphasized the need for small classes and intensive language learning sessions for effective language learning.
6. In fact, our experience at FSI—based on work with such related languages as Thai and Lao, German and Dutch, Russian and Ukrainian, French and Italian, and Spanish and Portuguese—is that a relatively weak knowledge of one language may be an actual hindrance in trying to learn a related third language.
7. This model is not unique to FSI, of course. Professor Eleanor Jorden of Cornell University and Bryn Mawr has long advocated and used an instructional model based on the closely coordinated instruction of professional native-speaking and non-native-speaking instructors.
8. The Dean of FSI's School of Language Studies, Dr. John Campbell, emphasized in his remarks in the plenary panel at GURT's Pre-Conference session that FSI is committed in its program of Accelerated Personalized Training (APT) to four core principles:
   - Students are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning, including researching the types of tasks they will be responsible for at post;
   - Students take an active role in their learning and have input into how they wish to structure their training schedule and their training day;
   - When available, educational technology is an integral part of the program, thereby enabling each individual learner to meet his or her own needs; and
   - Emphasis is placed on helping the learners to learn "how to learn" when they are on their own.
9. Officers assigned to Europe, especially, often report that if they are in a conversation at a social gathering and cannot keep up, their interlocutors will often switch abruptly to English, almost always with a shift in topic and in the tone of the interaction. That is, the officers' ability in the language needs to be at a high level, indeed, before they can successfully participate in such conversations.