

# DEVELOPING FOREIGN LANGUAGE FLUENCY

By Susan Gross

Students enroll in foreign language classes and stay in foreign language classes because they aspire to fluency. They drop foreign language classes when their aspiration appears to be thwarted.

Enrollment in upper-level classes is dismal. Approximately 50% of first-year high school students drop foreign language by Level III. Only about 5% of students continue studying their language through the highest-level course. Enrollment is even worse at universities. Very few students make it to third-year level university classes through study at the university alone. A recent survey found that almost every student in a university's 300-level classes either had previously studied language in high school or else had independent contact with the target culture. Every student who entered Language 101 as a neophyte had abandoned all hope of fluency.

Virtually every person, according to the Colorado Model Content Standards for Foreign Languages, is capable of achieving fluency in the four essential skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, we deliver this ability to only 5% of our students.

Schools that teach for fluency have consistently higher levels of enrollment. In these schools, as many as 25% of first-year language students ultimately complete the highest-level class.

## What is fluency?

Fluency means using the language smoothly, with ease. Hesitation is the opposite of fluency. Standard One of the Colorado Model Content Standards for Foreign Languages addresses “**all four essential skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.**” Each of these essential language skills has a fluency component.

A fluent **listener** comprehends the language without repetition, reduced speed, or re-wording. A fluent **speaker** expresses him or herself spontaneously, in an unrehearsed situation. A fluent **reader** comprehends text in the language smoothly and without assistance. A fluent **writer** expresses him or herself at a rate of about 100 words per 5 minutes without recourse to a dictionary.

## Teaching for fluency is brain-friendly

Teaching for fluency not only increases enrollment and meets the Colorado Standards, it is brain-friendly. In a fluency-oriented class, the teacher is concerned with what the students are able to do. Student performance is used to determine the rate at which new information is introduced. While accuracy is a goal in all language classes, the teacher does not squelch student enthusiasm with interruptions or with a sea of red marks

on compositions. Classroom activities provide abundant comprehensible input, from the first day of class throughout all levels. Assessment is continual, so there is no need for students to review or cram in preparation for tests.

In a non-fluency-oriented class, the teacher is concerned with how many chapters have been “covered” in a textbook. New information is introduced because the last chapter is “done” and it is “time” for the next chapter. Students become hesitant due to frequent error correction and many are reluctant to speak or write any more than the minimum required to get by. Classroom activities focus on learning and applying language rules. Students practice these rules in numerous output activities. Assessment is formal and announced; students are expected to study in preparation for these examinations.

Krashen’s “order of acquisition hypothesis” posits that the human brain will naturally acquire the various features of a language in a predictable order. This order cannot be altered by instruction. Since present and past tenses tend to be acquired early, along with certain object pronouns, the students in a fluency class will begin using these language features with some accuracy, even in the first year of language. In contrast, students in a non-fluency first-year class will be expected to practice the entire conjugation paradigm of one present tense verb after another, together with the genders of nouns. Given that a conjugation paradigm is not an element of acquisition, and that accuracy in noun genders is acquired fairly late, the students find themselves battling with their own brains.

Most foreign language classes (and all major textbooks) ignore and indeed contradict the natural “order of acquisition.” As a result, many students find that learning a language is difficult and unpleasant. Attempts to camouflage the unpleasant aspect of working against one’s own brain have sprouted innumerable games and gimmicks. Despite a plethora of games and projects and activities, we find ourselves surrounded by students who speak the language hesitantly, who rely on memorized phrases, and who are virtually unable to speak without planning their output the night before.

Small wonder, then, that enrollment declines dramatically in most foreign language programs.

### **Assessing for fluency**

How can we assess for fluency? The tests that accompany textbooks are not fluency tests. The National French, Spanish, and German Tests are not fluency-centered. Fortunately, there is a good fluency assessment tool. The State of New York requires that all students pass the New York State Proficiency exam in order to enter Level II of their language as ninth-graders. Furthermore, the New York State Regents Exam assesses students at the end of Level III. Both the Proficiency Exam and the Regents Exam are designed to assess fluency in all four essential skills. The rubrics, grading criteria, sample questions, and procedures for administering have been developed and improved every

year. By giving students a fluency assessment, we can determine what our students can do with the language rather than what they know about the language.

It takes energy to conduct classes that are dominated by comprehensible input. It takes courage to abandon the familiar textbook-driven grammar syllabus. But such courage is necessary if we are going to produce a generation of people who do not say, “I took two years of French and I can’t even order a cup of coffee.”