

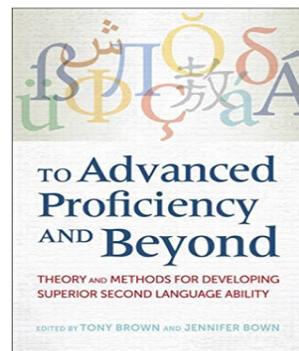


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To Advanced Proficiency and Beyond: Theory and Methods for Developing Superior Second Language Ability (2015)

Brown, T., & Bown, J. (Eds.)
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Reviewed by Matthew Siegel



Tackling a relatively underdeveloped research area—moving from intermediate to advanced proficiency in a foreign language—this book provides an overview of empirical data relating to instruction, assessment, and program evaluation. In describing language proficiency, the book draws heavily upon guidelines and frameworks developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR). An edited work with chapters contributed by professional educators and researchers with solid academic credentials, it provides a mix of both theory and practice in a wide variety of contexts and languages.

The book is divided into three parts: definition of the characteristics of high-level language learning and learners, approaches to maximizing language gain at home and abroad, and future directions in assessment and program design.

The first part consists of two chapters. In the first chapter, some major government-supported language programs (such as the Defense Language Institute and the Foreign Service Institute) are examined to distill macrostrategies for planning lessons and developing curricula, core characteristics of advanced-level language learners, factors for success of an immersion experience, alternative assessment options, and faculty development. In the second chapter, the researcher-contributors present a study to determine the relationships among first and second language proficiency and cognitive task difficulty.

The second part of the book focuses on various approaches to maximizing foreign language proficiency. In Chapter 3, heritage speakers of languages deemed critical for national security are examined in the context of a federally-sponsored program to develop professional English language skills to fill positions that require bilingual and bicultural employees. Issues such as the definition of advanced language ability and competence, preferred program design and institutional approaches to promote that competence, and formative and summative language assessment methods, are addressed. Chapter 4 examines advanced foreign language study through the debating process in order to assist students in supporting and defending their opinions in their second language—a core task for ACTFL's Superior level. A study of

university level Russian learners in a Global Debate course highlights the importance of curricular design, specifically tailored to specific proficiency outcomes, for successful student outcomes. In Chapter 5, individualized instruction is shown to be a bridge for Chinese language students who ultimately attend Chinese universities alongside their Chinese-speaking peers (direct enrollment). In order to obtain the superior-level skills necessary to succeed in that environment, the authors stress that students must move beyond mere linguistic ability, and receive domain training in non-standard language, Chinese presentational skills, and cultural literacy; the Flagship Model is presented as a means of accomplishing this, and course materials, methodology, and outcomes are discussed. Chapter 6 deals with the *ceiling effect* of Arabic language learning—the tendency of many students to reach a plateau in their language skills. The authors maintain that the key to overcoming this effect is extended periods of intensive study in an Arabic-language immersion environment; fifty-two participants are studied within the context of this intensive study program in Jordan. Chapter 7 focuses on the development of L2 proficiency and literacy within the context of several federally-supported overseas language training programs. Data from over 1,400 high school and college students were examined to look at gains in reading, listening, and speaking abilities within these programs, as well as correlations with initial L2 proficiency, age, and specific language choice.

The third part of the book deals with future directions, and consists of three chapters. Assessment is addressed in Chapter 8; evaluation of performance in the Human Resources field is posited as an option in assessing advanced foreign language and culture ability. The HR-developed tool described in the chapter provides both task and contextual performance assessment by incorporating downward feedback, self-assessment, and peer assessment, giving a *fuller picture* of performance. The demand and supply dynamic of professional language skills is addressed in Chapter 9, pointing to both global business and industry needs and the intersection of foreign language with STEM. Current baselines of supply are disappointing, according to the authors, with median proficiencies ranging from low- to high-intermediate; promising areas of programmatic innovation, including more efficient extended learning sequences and higher quality intensive instruction, are noted. Chapter 10 draws on the similarities and differences among three specific language programs to examine what *advanced language ability* means, and what it takes to achieve it. Future needs include investment in earlier foreign language instruction, closely articulated advanced-level materials, and teacher education and professional development.

The ideal audience for this book would fall into one of two categories: researchers who want to focus on advanced language acquisition and foreign language program or curriculum designers. Because the book covers many facets of an underdeveloped research area, it is a valuable source for future research ideas; it is a good starting point for either graduate students or seasoned researchers to enter a burgeoning area ripe for empirical study. For a program administrator or curriculum designer, this book provides insight into several well-known language instruction programs, revealing aspects of the curriculum or program itself which seems to support advanced language learning success. Due perhaps to the wide variety of subject matter and multiple contributors, this is not a book that is well suited for cover-to-cover reading. Although there is a common thematic element to all the chapters, the reader can select specific topics of particular interest without concern for missing context.

What I particularly enjoyed while reading this book was the way the contributors and editors balanced breadth with depth. A multitude of topics are covered in this book: language ability, instruction, assessment, and program design. A wide variety of contexts (university and

workforce), languages, and programs are discussed. However, empirical support and appropriate detail are not sacrificed; presentation of research questions, findings (including useful, comprehensive, and easy-to-read tables), well-articulated conclusions, and future directions are exactly what one would expect from seasoned academic researchers.

As a guide and overview of theory and methods for developing advanced levels of second language ability, this book fulfills its function. Recognizing the formidable task of providing an overview of a diverse and hitherto less developed area of research, I would hope that the editors will continue their work in a future edition which would include some qualitative research in advanced language proficiency; the voices of participants would add a valuable dimension to this exciting area of research, one that is missing given the book's exclusive quantitative focus.

Matthew Siegel, formerly a high school mathematics teacher, became interested in second language acquisition after teaching in Xi'an, China. Subsequently, he earned a MA in TESOL from Notre Dame of Maryland University, and is currently enrolled in the doctoral program in Technology in Education and Second Language Acquisition (TESLA) at the University of South Florida.

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