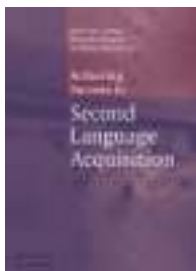


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### Chapter

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## Epilogue

### From here to there: attaining near-native proficiency

You may be taking a language for university requirements or general casual interest. Perhaps you do not plan a career based on language skill. In that case, this epilogue is not for you.

If, however, you do plan a career in which you will need to use foreign language professionally or wish to become very, very proficient in the language you are learning, you should be aware that the level of language proficiency attained in a typical university foreign-language program is insufficient for professional use of the foreign language. You will need to develop a lifelong-learning approach to foreign-language acquisition to acquire professional and advanced professional (near-native) levels of foreign language proficiency. To date, there is not a lot known about how to do this. Among the authors of this book are those who have achieved near-native proficiency in one or more languages, those who have taught or supervised foreign-language programs for highly advanced students, and those who have conducted research on the attributes of high-level proficiency and what it takes to reach it. This chapter, then, reports on what we do know to date from personal experience in learning and teaching at high levels and in early research results from surveys of individuals who have reached these levels.

#### **Attributes and experiences of successful high-level learners**

You may have heard a lot about what a good language learner is. You may have been told that one learning style or another is better. You may have heard that a high language aptitude test score is necessary if you want to reach high levels of foreign-language proficiency. You may think that one teaching method is better than another. You may think that study abroad is essential. If you think any or all of these things, you will be surprised to learn that the current research shows that there are multiple paths to high levels of proficiency and that all kinds of people from all walks of life reach near-native levels. Here, specifically, are some of the findings:

- Students of all learning styles (synoptic and ectenic; visual, auditory, and kinesthetic; any personality type) have successfully reached near-native proficiency – although some types may have more success at

earlier stages and others at later stages in the typically long process of reaching near-native levels (5–17 years is the norm).

- Individuals with high scores on language aptitude tests reach high levels of proficiency; so can students with low scores on language aptitude tests.
- Students who were slow starters are often the tortoises that win the proficiency race.
- Students have reached high levels of proficiency regardless of the method by which they were taught: grammar-based, audiolingual, communicative, or even individual mixes.
- Some individuals have reached high levels of proficiency without having spent more than a few weeks abroad.
- Students have reached high levels of proficiency whether or not they received formal instruction at high levels.

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## Learning styles

The information on learning styles is mixed. However, in all samples of students at high levels of proficiency, there have been individuals of all learning styles possible.

In the 1980s, a study of 102 diplomats in training indicated that students who were left-brain dominant (or better, whole-brain dominant with some left leanings) – a style that is quite similar to what we have been referring to as ectenic learners in this book – reached near-native proficiency in a language course three times more often than students who were right-brain dominant (i.e. exhibited more synoptic traits). A number of these successful students started out slowly and did not keep pace initially with their more synoptic peers, but once they had reached advanced levels, they began to outstrip them in what looked like the traditional tortoise vs. hare race (Leaver, 1986).

On the other hand, in a recent study of 20+ diplomats currently or previously in training, synoptic learners were substantially overrepresented relative to ectenic learners. Nonetheless, ectenic learners were, indeed, in the mix, and among the synoptic learners, the majority reported a preference for the ectenic trait of sharpening (Ehrman and Lord, 2004).

Another recent and ongoing study of nearly sixty high-level language users from a variety of professions – legal, teaching, political science, translation & interpretation, and journalism, among others – was closer to the Leaver 1986 study of diplomats in its findings. While there were both synoptic and ectenic learners in this recent group, a slight majority reported themselves to be ectenic in their approaches (Leaver, 2003a).

What does all of this mean? Frankly, we are still investigating the situation, but these early results of information gathering would seem to indicate that it really does not matter what your learning style is. You can make it to near-native levels

if you take advantage of your strengths and find strategies to compensate for your weaknesses.

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### Language aptitude

The Defense Language Institute uses scores on these tests to indicate whether or not students should be enrolled in specific languages, and they are influential in assignment to language study at the Foreign Service Institute. Nonetheless, among successful high-level language users have been a number of students who performed poorly on these tests and there are, in the collective experience of the authors, students with high language aptitude scores who have failed to achieve high levels of proficiency.

The reasons for this are unclear as yet, but there are several possibilities. One is that when students do poorly on a test, there may be many reasons other than what the test is assessing. For example, they might be very fatigued when they take the test. That is an individual difference rather than a systematic one. Another explanation could be that different factors come into play at higher levels than at lower levels, which in turn raises the question of whether the variables considered to indicate strong potential for successful language learning on the extant tests might give less useful information about eventual attainment of near-native language proficiency (John B. Carroll, personal communication, September 1988). Stansfield (1989), too, noted that current language aptitude tests (and they have not changed to this day) did not take into account the attributes needed for attainment of high-level proficiency. If this is the case, the possible dichotomy in attributes needed for initial language learning and those needed at higher levels might also explain the prevalent tortoise–hare phenomenon.

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### Teaching method

Often, one hears contemporary educators say that if someone is not taught via a communicative method, he or she will not be able to learn a language well. In stark contrast to this statement, the majority of individuals in the recent study of students from various walks of life learned from either grammar-based or audiolingual methods (Leaver and Atwell, 2002). Only one of them mentioned teaching method at all as something important in how he acquired language, and that individual lambasted current teaching methods (Cole, 2004). That does not mean, though, that your teachers are wrong to use communicative methods. We all hope that communicative methods will produce even better results, and in a shorter time, than the older methods. The problem is that reaching high levels of proficiency simply takes a long time (what we call “time on task”), and newer teaching methods have not been in use long enough to know whether or not they will have better results than the older methods (Leaver, 2001). Furthermore, we need to keep the issue of style match in mind. One method may be better for a given student, and another more helpful to a different one.

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## Study abroad

The results on study abroad were a little surprising because everyone agreed – and it is commonsense – that one needs to be thoroughly familiar with the foreign culture in order to reach near-native levels of proficiency. However, many of the nearly sixty respondents in the Leaver–Atwell study (2002) stated that study abroad helped them at intermediate levels, but not at high levels (Leaver, 2001). This is in keeping with Bernhardt's finding (cited in Ehrman, 2002) that two weeks in an *émigré* community is usually sufficient for anything needed at the highest levels of proficiency (the situation being that none of these students would be at those levels had they not had study abroad experience or the equivalent at earlier levels of instruction). Similarly, Shekhtman (2003b) reported no differences in high-level journalists who went abroad without accompanying classroom instruction, either in-country or prior to departure; it was the combination of in-country experience and classroom instruction that made a difference – and if only one or the other learning experience was possible, the classroom instruction experience was the most powerful at helping students attain higher levels. (Another kind of classroom experience was as highly powerful as the language classroom – attending classes in subject matter courses or advanced degree programs in the foreign country with foreign peers and without access to other speakers of English.)

There were, in fact, a number of individuals in the Leaver–Atwell study who had either never been to a country where their foreign language was spoken or had been there for a very short period of time (such as two weeks). Either personal reasons or the international political climate kept them from soaking up the culture onsite. That does not mean that they had no cultural input or experiences. Quite the reverse: they sought out *émigrés* and spent much time in the *émigré* community. In essence, they made a living-abroad experience for themselves at home.

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## Formal instruction

Some individuals who have reached near-native levels have had classroom instruction at high levels; others have not. Those who had it have stated that it was essential for their reaching the levels that they did. Those who did not have it wished that they had had it, although there was a small minority who had achieved a high level without classroom instruction, had done it quite quickly, and considered that classroom instruction would have been a waste of their time. The statistics, though, suggest an advantage for instruction for most learners. Those who received outcomes-based (i.e. the goal had to be met) instruction at a professional level of proficiency, with the goal being to reach near-native proficiency, achieved that level at a saving of ten years or more, compared to those who just tried to get it on their own through personal experience in using the language.

## Ways to reach high levels of proficiency

Although students of all types reach high levels of proficiency, they do have a number of learning approaches in common. The kinds of activities that typical successful high-level language learners have practiced include:

- assessments
- individualized study plans
- high-level courses
- cross-cultural observations
- contact with native speakers
- time on task
- foreign-degree work
- formal language use

### Assessment

Many successful high-level language users have found it useful to have their proficiency level and proficiency gain checked periodically. It helps them plan their activities better. There are several mechanisms for doing this. Introduced in chapter 1, these include: (1) proficiency test; (2) can-do assessment; (3) diagnostic assessment.

If you choose to do periodic assessments to help you stay on track and to measure your progress, keep in mind that the higher your proficiency, the slower will be your overt progress, i.e. the next-higher proficiency level will take longer to reach. There is a learning curve that flattens out at the higher levels because there is so much to know by the time you start approaching near-native levels of speech. For this reason, it is unlikely that you would need an assessment more often than twice a year, even if you are working intensively on language improvement.

### Proficiency test

You might take a proficiency test whenever you feel that you have made significant progress. A proficiency test can give you information about the progress you have made (or not made), the various aspects of proficiency that you need to work on, and the level at which you are speaking, reading, writing, and listening. As noted in chapter 1, there are two extant proficiency tests. One is given by the US government; it can include all four skills, but it is given only to government employees and only in those skills that are work-pertinent. If you work for the government, this test is, indeed, an option for you. If you do not work for the US government, you can take a test from the American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the Association of Language Testers Europe (ALTE), or the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) in Washington (all these organizations can be found on the Internet). The ACTFL test is most typically

given for speaking skills; however, scales are available for all four language skills, and ACTFL is now giving a writing test in some languages with more to come. We would note that the ACTFL proficiency test, as it currently exists, is useful only up to and including Superior-level proficiency, which is short of the high levels we are discussing here (higher level tests are in the planning and may soon be available). In any event, the ACTFL test can serve as a baseline for you. We would also note that for purposes of tracking your progress you do not need to take a formal proficiency test. Rather, you can have a certified tester (or a former certified tester) give you an informal approximation of your current level.

### **Can-do statements**

Another mechanism for checking your progress is the use of can-do statements. The organizations mentioned in chapter 1 – the National Foreign Language Center, the Defense Language Institute, and the Association of Language Testers Europe – all have can-do statements online that cover high levels, as well as lower ones. (The URLs for these sites can be found in chapter 1.)

### **Diagnostic assessment**

If you take a formal course at this level, you may find yourself at an institution that uses diagnostic assessments. There are both government programs and private ones that use diagnostic assessments to guide their teaching practices. Typically, a diagnostic assessment includes a test that indicates linguistic specifics that a student possesses well, a little, or poorly (found through a diagnostic test, proficiency test, or can-do statements), learning styles and strategies information, and a learning plan for self-study situations or teaching plan for classroom situations (Ehrman, 2001; Cohen, 2003; Shekhtman, 2003b).

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### **Individualized study plan**

Just as, at lower levels, you made an ISP to help you organize your language learning, so, too, can you make an ISP at higher levels (Leaver, 2003b). The contents, however, will probably look quite different. Actual classroom work may well be a very small part of your learning plan, partly because courses are rarely available at this level. Opportunities for making presentations or writing for publication, as well as for working in jobs that require language use, on the other hand, may figure prominently in your plan.

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### **High-level course**

If you find yourself in a high-level course or able to take one, there are at least five things that you might want to have included in your program. These are:

- the development of automaticity
- replacement of fossilized, incorrect forms with accurate ones;
- the development of sociolinguistic sophistication
- the development of sociocultural observation
- practice in making very fine distinctions among similar language elements.

### **Automaticity**

Level 4 speech is characterized by large amounts of automatic, correct speech. The more you can automate the expressions that are not yet automatic, the more your speech will sound distinguished.

### **Fossilization**

While acquiring a foreign language, most people learn some things wrong. These then become “stuck” or “fossilized” in their speech habits, and it takes much effort to break these incorrect habits. Ehrman (2002) posits five kinds of fossilization at high levels of foreign language proficiency:

- functional fossilization (“the continued use of incorrect or limited linguistic forms, structures, or semantic domains,” p. 249);
- instruction-fostered fossilization (“the result of overly compliant interlocutors, teachers, and non-teachers who adapt to the learner’s errors,” p. 249);
- domain fossilization (the use of routinized, stereotyped language that accompanies narrow work tasks);
- affective fossilization (protection of self-esteem and self-image to the point of avoiding increased sophistication in language use for fear of errors); and
- strategic fossilization (overuse of strategies that are more appropriate at lower levels of proficiency, e.g. compensation strategies, and under-use of those that are more appropriate at higher levels, e.g. planning and evaluation strategies; can also refer to becoming fixated on the particular teaching method used at lower levels).

To reach very high levels of proficiency, any morphology (word forms) that has been fossilized in incorrect form needs to be replaced not only with accurate forms but with ones that are used automatically, as well as correctly. Further, if you have been using simplified grammar (even if accurately and automatically), this, too, can be a kind of fossilization (we call it “level fossilization” [Shekhtman, Lord, and Kuznetsova, 2003]), and you will need to work on replacing those constructions with more sophisticated ones. For example, the constructions “I could do it, if I had the means” or “I will do it if I have the means,” in your linguistic repertoire need to be joined by other, more sophisticated constructions that are synonymous in meaning, such as “Were I to have the means, I could do it,” as well as colloquial forms for use in tailoring, e.g. “Give me the stuff I need, and I could pull it off.”



### **Sociolinguistic sophistication**

At higher levels of proficiency, speakers are expected to tailor their language to their audiences (see chapter 7). Coursework that teaches register and genre differences can be very helpful at this level.

### **Sociocultural observation**

Understanding the culture, its unwritten words, and its icons is very important at high levels of proficiency. Such advanced speakers are expected not only to understand references to history, films, literary quotations, political and social humor, and everyday reality from pets to potty training but also to use references, humor, and household vocabulary (not typically taught in the classroom or textbook) appropriately. A course that explains sociocultural differences and teaches you to observe these phenomena can help you reach high levels of proficiency faster.

### **Fine distinctions**

One of the main hallmarks of very high-level language is its precision. The speaker uses just the right synonym, construction, or idiom, rather than relying on circumlocutions or the ability of the interlocutor to understand from context what is really meant by a less precise term. A tendency to notice and make such fine distinctions may help explain why sharpening was so important for the synoptic learners in the Ehrman and Lord (2004) study, and why ecenics do very well in the Leaver studies. Precision is the sharpener's stock in trade. If you do not tend to sharpen, this is a skill that needs developing for most who aspire to the highest proficiency levels.

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### **Cross-cultural observation**

High-level language users are not dependent on a teacher, native speaker, or book, to point out cross-cultural differences. They notice the differences between their own culture and the foreign culture on their own. Several respondents in the Leaver–Atwell (2002) study observed that developing good observational skills was a must for them in reaching distinguished levels of proficiency (Leaver, 2003a).

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### **Extensive and intensive contact with native speakers**

It goes without saying that one cannot reach high levels of foreign-language proficiency without contact with native speakers. The more extensive, the better. The more intensive, the better. Extensive contact with native speakers will introduce you to many dialects, a variety of social styles, and a wide range of language domains. Intensive contact will require you to develop a large vocabulary reserve in one or more narrow domains. Both are important. To make

the most of your contact time with native speakers, you might consider keeping a notebook of questions that you would like to ask a native speaker; in the notebook might be linguistic items you heard or read and did not understand, inexplicable cultural behaviors, or instances of *faux pas* that you have made.

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### Time on task

If anything is crystal clear from the research to date of high-end language users, it is that time on task is inescapable. The more time you spend reading, writing, listening to, and speaking your foreign language, the better you will be at it, regardless of whether you learn quickly or with difficulty. Every learner who has reached high levels of proficiency has done so through a lengthy period of study – sometimes intentional and sometimes a result of circumstances. A high-level program of study can significantly reduce the overall amount of study, but no matter what, language proficiency takes time to take hold (Leaver, 2003a).

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### Foreign degree work

Next to language programs at the superior level of proficiency, foreign-degree work has been reported by language learners as an effective mechanism to improve foreign-language skills rapidly. Many more high-level language users in the Leaver–Atwell study had experienced foreign-degree work than had experienced study abroad and of those with both kinds of experience, all indicated that the foreign-degree work was the most significant in moving them from the superior level to the distinguished level (Leaver, 2003a).

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### Formal language use

Finally, finding every possible opportunity to develop and use formal language can be critical to the development of high-level skills. A major distinction between the superior and distinguished level of proficiency is the ability to use formal language structures and lexis (vocabulary and idioms), of the sort that are used in speeches, lectures, and academic discourse. In this case, the guidelines are not talking about just understanding and using formal *communication*, but rather, the subtleties of formal language that are needed for writing for *publication*, *editing*, *negotiating* effectively, truly *controlling* the conversational partner when that is desirable, *adapting* speech and writing to the audience. These are often skills that not even every native speaker has; they are the skills that are generally developed by native speakers (and foreign-language learners) as a result of experience and meeting the linguistic requirements of higher education.

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## Conclusion

Here we end our epilogue to this volume. If you make it all the way to the near-native level of proficiency, you are to be commended, for you will belong to an elite group. We hope that the suggestions in this chapter, based on the practices and experiences of successful high-level language users, will help you join that crowd. We know it can be done – with time, diligence, and the appropriate strategies.