

Learner's Milestones in Acquiring Higher Level Language Proficiency

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Learning language at the higher ends of the proficiency scale differs in a number of ways from beginning and intermediate language learning. For advanced learners, linguistic factors change with increasing proficiency. So do the learners' interests. This paper will focus on each of these two areas important to the teaching of higher levels of proficiency.

Linguistic Factors

Linguistic factors include sociolinguistics & culture, subject matter, accuracy, ability to express opinions, formal and informal language, grammar, language training, counseling and persuading, vocabulary, pronunciation, and comprehension,

Sociolinguistic and Cultural Factors

Sociolinguistic and cultural factors take on greater importance at higher levels. At higher levels of foreign language proficiency, students should have a strong awareness of the customs and the culture of the language.

Subject Matter (Content Area)

Which content or subject matter a learner can be expected to have mastered depends on the speaker's own background, general level of education, and particular areas of expertise. Although the subject matter of this level speaker is not different of that of level 3, the linguist is able to handle at Level 4 all non-technical situations in any domain, as well as all situations in his or her profession.

Accuracy

At Level 2, the "working level" of proficiency, often referred to as the Advanced Level, the speaker speaks with confidence, yet he has to search for words. At higher levels he or she uses the exact word for each occasion. By the time the learner reaches Level 4, he or she will have an arsenal of synonyms to use for highly precise expression.

Expression of Opinion

The learner at higher levels of proficiency needs not only to be able to express opinions but also to provide a detailed and persuasive rationale behind those opinions, using appropriate sociolinguistic strategies, particularly culturally appropriate discourse, in doing so. Learners at this level should be able to talk with linguistic maturity about social, economic, and political problems (and many other topics) and provide support for his or her opinion on any topic in a conversation in which he or she is participating.

Formal and Informal Language

One difference between higher and lower levels of foreign language proficiency is that while both levels of learners will speak fluently on informal subjects at Level 3, at Level 4, he or she will swim in formal oceans of oral discourse, as well, such as testifying in court or giving briefing to a representative from the government.

Grammar

The grammar of a highly proficient student is practically errorless; mistakes (slips of the tongue) do occur, as they occur in native speech, but there are few true errors (where the linguistic forms are simply not known). Among the grammatical forms under complete control of the learner are high frequency language structures such as verb tenses, particularly the distinction between the perfect and the imperfect; the proper use of active and passive participles; pronoun suffixes with verbs, nouns and prepositions, and broken plurals in nouns and adjectives.

At this level, the learner makes use of sophisticated discourse structures. The entire grammatical system has been internalized and is stable, and more obscure, individualized, and obsolete grammatical forms are known. Both morphology and syntax exhibit mastery of complex forms, as would be expected from the language use of an educated native speaker.

Language Tailoring

Language tailoring is a salient and defining trait of a learner who possesses native-like language proficiency. In tailoring language to suit the audience, the speaker changes his/her tone of voice and vocabulary, even grammatical forms chosen.

Counseling and Persuading

Both counseling and persuading imply tailoring language. Counseling an employee who is not doing his job is an attempt to persuade him to perform in the way you want requires tailoring of language if you wish to secure his consent and good-will concurrently.

At Level 4, the speaker should be able to speak about any topic with the area of his or her professional experience. His language is not only broad but extensive. Level 4 performance is very, very impressive. The learner need not have a college degree although it is rare for someone without a college degree to reach Level 4 because of the linguistic sophistication required. Does the Level 4 always speak as a lecturing professor? Not at all! He tailors his language from moment to moment and that is one of the ways to recognize him. If he is lecturing, he should sound like a college professor, but if he is speaking to a child, he should use an entirely different register.

Vocabulary

A Level 4 speaks the target language with extensive and precise vocabulary nearly equal to that of the educated native speaker in breath and idioms.

Pronunciation

The Level 4 may still has an accent but very rarely mispronounces words or makes mistakes in intonation or stress. The accent is generally slight, and depending upon the individual learner and the language being studied, the accent may be undetectable in many, if not most, circumstances.

Comprehension

As for listening and reading comprehension, a Level 4 can understand the content of all conversations and formal presentations within the range of his or her experience, including common dialectal forms and with the exception of those extreme dialectal variations that are difficult even for the native speaker. Some colloquialisms outside the domains of his or her experience may occasionally take him or her by surprise.

Learner Interests

The interest of the learners begin to shift as they approach higher levels of proficiency. High-level learners, for example, might begin to focus on historical events in the Middle East, such as the Crusades and their resulting influence on European Languages. The change in interest occurs on the lexical level, as well as on the level of social phenomena.

Understanding History and Social Phenomena

The world is full of contrasting cultures and civilizations. Mankind is probably more diversified today than ever before. Earlier, the Western and Eastern civilizations lived independently. They coexisted due to the fact that both civilizations were much alike. They were all based on subsistence agriculture, finding their main source of energy in wind, running water, and animal and human muscles. None of them would feel the need to bring overwhelming power to change the other.

The insulation of one civilization from another, however, was never absolute. There was always some physical or mental interaction going on. Wars sometimes can bring civilizations closer, and in the Near East, two cultural traditions have influenced one another although their histories are distinct—yet inseparable. For example, the interaction of the cultures resulted in a strong and continuing influence of Arabic on Spanish.

Christianity, Judaism and Islam are the great monotheistic religions. Before Islam, the Arabs were polytheists believing in nature's gods, demons and spirits. There were Christian Arabs and Jews before there were Moslems. The Koran, one of the greatest books of mankind, was a crucial document of Arabic culture because it propagates the Arabic tongue in a written form. This is an example of the kind of linguistics, sociological, and religious socio-cultural information a Level 4 would be

expected to have if that learner were a student of Arabic. Knowing the major events and the times in which they occurred in the history of a country can also be expected of a Level 4 learner, as can be cultural knowledge such as the fact that long ago there was no Arabic theatre, though the story teller, the poet, and the dancer all flourished and that the Arabic musical art is commemorated in European languages through the names of lute, guitar and rebec.

Interest in Native Speakers and their Societies

As learners acquire greater language skills, their interest in émigré populations, such as Arabs in the United States, increases. Often, they begin to identify with these populations and want to associate with them and know all about them. Arabs first began to emigrate to the United States in large numbers in the eighteenth century, These immigrants remained committed to their native language and culture. As early as 1892, New York began to publish its first Arabic newspaper, "*Kawkab America*" the star of America. Arabic literary societies sprang up in several American cities. Arabic poets, essayists and playwrights were born. Of these most famous poets was Gibran Khalil Gibran, from Lebanon, who settled in Boston's South End in 1895. During the wars he became an activist for Arab liberation. While Gibran is, of course, no longer alive, Arab poets in emigration can still kindle the love of the Level 4 learner for literature in Arabic, and the émigré population can bring aspects of the homeland to the States-bound learner.

Conclusion

These, then, are some of the ways in which learning language at the higher ends of the proficiency scale differs from beginning and intermediate language learning. The improvement in linguistic skills and the changes in interest will undoubtedly result in programs of learning that look very different from earlier programs and that incorporate both sociolinguistic and socio-cultural elements in great depth.

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