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# *Foreign Language Proficiency: The Rockefeller Fellowship Study*

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## **Proficiency Affects Effectiveness**

**O**ne of the primary objectives of the Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship Program for Foreign Language Teachers in the High Schools is to increase the foreign language proficiency of this fellowship winners so that they may become more effective teachers. According to Gene I. Maeroff in his recent book, *The Empowerment of Teachers: Overcoming the Crisis in Confidence*, "Strengthening the intellectual and methodological foundation of teachers is one of the most important challenges facing those who want to improve the quality of instruction. Such a change is vital if teaching is to take a professional aura; for without proficiency at one's craft, there is little hope of exerting authority in the exercise of that craft." (Maeroff, 1988). A high level of proficiency in language skills and cultural awareness greatly enhances a foreign language teacher's ability to teach with confidence and command the respect of students and colleagues.

Since the Programs inception in 1986, over 100 Rockefeller Fellows each summer have spent eight weeks abroad, or in some cases in intensive language schools in the U.S., pursuing a research project or combining language classes with a total immersion experience in the foreign culture. The Program, therefore, offers a unique opportunity to assess the proficiency gains made by a substantial number and variety of high school teachers in a relatively brief but concentrated period of total foreign language immersion. A study commissioned by the Program in 1988 has yielded important statistics as well as implications for the high school teaching profession.

Rockefeller fellowship winners in 1988 were tested for oral proficiency both before and after their eight-week fellowship summer. Sister Mary Helen Kashuba of Chestnut Hill College conducted the study. A pilot version of this project done in 1987 indicated that a more complete study would be justified; at that time, only fourteen Fellows were tested. Ninety-two of the 108 Fellows were given oral proficiency interviews and rated according to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) scale. (Fellows teaching the classical languages, Latin and Greek, were not tested for proficiency nor were those who were native speakers of the language they taught.) Each rating was confirmed by a second tester, as required by ACTFL.

Designed to assess generalized levels of performance in the foreign language rather than specific grammatical or lexical knowledge, the oral proficiency interview and ACTFL scale are based on the federal government's Foreign Service Institute (FSI) rating system and are widely accepted in secondary schools and colleges across the country. ACTFL identifies nine ranges of proficiency distributed across four levels (Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, Superior) with Superior speakers acknowledged as having "a 'professional' level of proficiency; that is, they can handle unknown topics and situations, give supported opinions, hypothesize, provide complicated explanations, describe in detail with a great deal of precision, and can tackle virtually any practical, social, professional, or abstract topic that they can discuss in their native language." (Omaggio, 1986) (The FSI scale also identifies two higher levels of proficiency within the Superior level, which are not used for academic ratings.) A teacher with Superior level skills has the communicative competence

necessary to handle all classroom situations and is able to do so with confidence.

Of the 92 Rockefeller Fellows tested before their summer experience, 40% were rated Superior according to the ACTFL scale; those fellows were, therefore, not required to have a post-summer interview. Of the remaining group, 51 were tested again after their eight weeks of intensive language experience. Table 1 illustrates the gains made by this group both within and between levels. Not included in this table are those who showed no gain (15) and those who showed a drop (3), largely attributable to a less intensive immersion experience. Fellows whose skills were rated in the intermediate and novice levels were generally those acquiring skills preparatory to teaching a second foreign language in their schools.

Table 1: Proficiency Gains Made by 1988 Rockefeller Fellows

Pre-Summer	Post-Summer	Number of Fellows
Advanced plus	Superior	12
Advanced	Superior	3
Advanced	Advanced high	8
Intermediate high	Advanced	7
Intermediate mid	Intermediate high	1
Novice high	Intermediate low	1
Novice mid	Intermediate high	1

Twenty-four or 47% of those re-tested moved up to a new level during the eight weeks. Another nine or 18% improved one range within a level. Of these, four or 8% made gains of several ranges. The most difficult improvements to accomplish are at the highest levels where progressively more language skill is needed to attain the next level; it is, therefore, noteworthy that 15 of the 51 or 29% attained the Superior level by the end of the summer.

### The Significance of Gains in Proficiency

The significance of these gains becomes apparent when one compares them to the expectations for proficiency improvement in a classroom setting among learners of comparable aptitude. The School of Language Studies of the FSI has reported that a person of high aptitude for learning languages requires 240 hours of classroom instruction to progress one level in a language of average difficulty; this would mean 30 hours of intensive classroom study per week for eight weeks. (Liskin-Gasparro, 1982) For

more difficult languages such as Japanese, Chinese, Arabic or Korean, a similar gain in proficiency is estimated to require 480 hours or 16 weeks of intensive study. It should be noted that FSI classes are small, training is full-time, and its students have a strong professional motivation to succeed. The accessibility of comparable classes in high school foreign language teachers is virtually nil; moreover, very few would be able or willing to take on such intensive study in addition to their professional obligations. (Carroll, 1967)

Classroom learning is a useful but inefficient way to attain Superior level proficiency since more language input than is provided in the classroom is necessary to develop the ability to think abstractly, argue and generally operate at a high level of proficiency. In a major study of the foreign language learning process, Stephen D. Krashen distinguishes between formal (artificial classroom) learning and informal (natural immersion) acquisition. Both linguistic environments are desirable; however, a survey of "good language learners," reports that "immersion and motivation" were the most frequent responses to the question of what factors influenced successful second language acquisition. (Krashen, 1988)

Above all, according to S. Savignon, "Attitude is the single most important factor in second language learning." (Savignon, 1988) Thus, the literature would suggest that a motivated teacher with a fellowship to study in a language immersion setting has both a personal and professional interest in improving his or her proficiency and, therefore, also a greater probability of success, especially at the higher levels of proficiency acquisition.

### Acquiring Cultural Awareness

The Rockefeller study indicates that important proficiency gains can be made by a significant percentage of pre-Superior-level high school teachers in just one summer of language immersion abroad. But, Rockefeller Fellows are not only making jumps of one or even two ranges in language proficiency, they are also acquiring contemporary cultural awareness and developing innovative and authentic curricular materials to

bring back to their classrooms. A 1988 Fellow from Concord, N.H., says, "The effort and all the hours spent on my project have brought rewards. First and foremost, the materials and language I was able to introduce into the curriculum transformed my classes, offering dimensions not found in any textbook, kindling interest in the most 'hard-to-reach' students. I found my teenagers delighted to deal with real documents, excited to hear of the latest words." The Rockefeller Fellowship Program has accumulated pages and pages of testimony to this effect from over 300 former Fellows who have sent reports of their professional activities, both inside and outside the classroom, to the Program Office.

### **This Program Merits Public and Private Support**

If so much can be accomplished in such a brief time by educators who are essential to our nation's efforts to prepare young Americans to function successfully in a competitive global environment, then this Program merits the support of a wide variety of concerned citizens. It is the only program of its kind for high school teachers, and as such it is a tribute to the generosity and foresight of the Rockefeller Foundation. However, as presently constituted, it can benefit only a little over 100 teachers a year. With additional public and private funding, these numbers can increase.

A special initiative is now underway through the Program Office to obtain co-funding which will make it possible to award more fellowships each year to qualified candidates within each state. Sources for this co-funding might include state foreign language associations or depart-

ments of education, private foundations or civic organizations. Thus far, Maine and Ohio have pledged co-funding and, in 1989, two additional fellowships were awarded to teachers from these states. The objective is to broaden the base of financial support for the Program as well as the numbers of teachers who will have the opportunity to make the significant gains in proficiency that have been documented in the report.

The Program Office welcomes inquiries and would be happy to work with any interested parties toward this goal. For further information, call (203) 447-7800 or write to the Rockefeller Fellowship Program for Foreign Language High School Teachers, Box 2001, Connecticut College, New London, CT 06320.

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### **J.E.T.T. Contributor Profile**

Dr. Doris Meyer is Project Director. Interested readers may reach her at the above-mentioned address. The Editors of *J.E.T.T.* were pleased to feature the 1988 Rockefeller Fellowship winners in Volume 21, No. 2/3, Summer-Fall, 1988, p. 29.