

# From Language to Literacy: The Evolving Concepts of Foreign Language Teaching at American Colleges and Universities Since 1945

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**Abstract** This chapter assesses the history of FL teaching and professional organizations since 1945 to explain the current lack of integration between language and content within collegiate foreign language curricula and the absence of more student-centered practices and research. It identifies major time periods marked by particular theories and pedagogical models that shaped attitudes and practices in Departments in their hiring and their classrooms. The historical analyses explores resulting concepts of learning styles and teaching objectives that evolved for beginning, intermediate and advanced level FL classes. These sections also incorporate the role of professional organizations, notably the MLA's responses and ACTFL's initiatives developed to address emergent needs across institutions. The author's objective is to illustrate how the enduring legacies of each era continue to influence FL departments' curricular decisions and in many cases explain their resistance to change. The author concludes by making the case for learner-centered pedagogies presented in forthcoming chapters and suggests the parameters for faculty initiatives to be undertaken to reform their curricula.

**Keywords** Audio-lingual · Cognitive · Proficiency · Standards · Bloom's taxonomy · Four skills · Psycholinguistics · Multiliteracy · Communicative competence

This chapter looks at the broad outline of developments in ways to teach foreign languages, starting from the post-WWII focus on language through memorization and skill practice as necessary initial stages in language acquisition, and reaching up to recent, student- and sociolinguistic-centered emphases in language acquisition. Its objective is to challenge readers to think about that historical legacy and its impact on the profession's practices in a period of transition in postsecondary education as a whole. This thumbnail history is not intended to be comprehensive, but rather to illustrate why the restructuring of language teaching at this time necessitates addressing the heritage of institutional and professional practices in foreign language (FL) instruction that initially dominated and still continues to influence the field well into the twenty-first century.

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As will be traced below, in the years following WW II to the present day, shifts in major directions for FL teaching have been associated with cross-disciplinary fields, notably behavioral and cognitive psychology, psycholinguistics, discourse analysis and computer technologies. Whether these initiatives preceded or developed while simultaneously influencing FL pedagogies, each needs to be discussed as they apply to specific phases of FL teaching rather than in the strict chronology of their historical appearance. This caveat is particularly relevant here to the current chapter's references to Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (1956).<sup>1</sup> In the following six decades, this early statement outlining a learning sequence for educator's assessment of cognitive processing has undergone a variety of reinterpretations, as new readings of the *Taxonomy* have been proposed and its applications expanded. Consequently, Bloom's *Taxonomy* will be referred to throughout this chapter in terms of the particular direction of its influence during a given era in FL teaching in the United States, not in any attempt to set a normative reading of its significance into place.

The major eras that emerge as significant need to be understood in terms of different outside forces. In the first four decades after WW II, empiricist models and structural linguistics (particularly in the 1950–1970s) that dominated the textbooks and assessment were structuring curricular decisions about elementary and intermediate years of language instruction. Advanced learners were not a special focus of attention. By the late 1970s, however, the ACTFL proficiency movement introduced a more comprehensive vision of what language instruction meant, setting performance objectives for the spectrum of language learners in North American colleges and thus intending to raise the profile of FL instruction. That vision was augmented in the 1990s by ACTFL's development of *Standards for Foreign Language Teaching*, which again broadened our focus by turning it onto what it meant to learn a language, turning classroom emphasis away from correctness and toward context-based performance of tasks relating to culture and communication in a variety of interactional settings. During this same period, the internet and increasingly available forms of online communication enabled a more intense focus on the learner that enabled Bloom's *Taxonomy* to reemerge and reframe our ways of thinking about stages in the FL acquisition process. With computers and later with iPods, iPads, tablets, e-readers, and a host of downloadable applications, students and their teachers could interact with authentic foreign languages on their terms and in real time as learner communities—increasingly, FL learning became identified with learning about foreign language use as manifestations of speakers' and writers' cultures.

After a look at what each of these stages meant to FL instruction, I argue in the chapter's conclusion that the cornerstone of language acquisition today needs to be understood in new ways: FL learning now has the broader goal of helping adult learners to use their extant literacy capabilities to interact with unfamiliar concepts expressed in an unfamiliar language; they need not only to learn about and interact

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<sup>1</sup> When Bloom's *Taxonomy* and the ACTFL *Standards* project are italicized and capitalized, they refer to the published volumes; in plain type, they refer to the model that Bloom et al. and ACTFL evolved, often represented in various diagrams.

with the language and its culture, but also how to move beyond classroom settings and manage their own identities and interactions in that new context. If this summary describes the new goals for FL learning, then such student literacy is fostered only when learners are able to apply features of preexisting knowledge to negotiate content, language, and pragmatic decisions about identity and action as covalent components of the meaning of language use. Such a project will, as the following analysis suggests, involve rethinking historically anchored structural and pedagogical components of many FL departments in North America.

## 1 Setting the Stage: Bloom's *Taxonomy* and the Turn Toward the Learner

In 1956, what many authorities acknowledge as the most significant twentieth-century public document in the field of education appeared: Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. Written by a committee with Benjamin S. Bloom as chair, this document broke down the education process into a series of goals, each of which could purportedly be met by learners who practiced increasingly more complex tasks leading them to structured learning outcomes in different domains; those tasks moved through a hierarchy of difficulty, from simpler to more complex (the taxonomy), that outlined the logic of the educational process.<sup>2</sup> The original proposal by the committee defined three domains of activity through which a learner acquired knowledge, each of which could be described with its own taxonomy, reflecting a hierarchy of difficulty from simpler/more fundamental activities of mind up through more difficult ones: cognitive (human thought processes), affective (the range for human emotional responses and their impact on thinking and behavioral processes), and psychomotor (how the body learns through physical activities). The three realms have been subsequently modified by many other scholars to apply to learning processes in different frameworks, all the while stressing both learners and their development over time.

The resulting report presented the tasks associated with learning in these domains as sequences, reflecting hierarchies of increasingly complex activity. Later critics pointed out that the result was a taxonomy of objectives for classroom instruction, one that described the difficulty of tasks imposed in designing tasks and tests, and

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<sup>2</sup> A major explication of the taxonomy, Bloom's *Handbook I: The Cognitive Domain*, appeared in 1956, and, subsequently in Krathwohl et al. *Handbook II* for the affective domain in 1964. Lorin W. Anderson and David Krathwohl edited a revised version of the taxonomies, *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomies of educational objectives* (2001 [1991st ed.]). The interrelationship of the psychomotor, affective, and the cognitive domains remains a conundrum for study, particularly given the variation in individual responses to learning, for example, how to swim and how to play basketball. One activity is individual and the other involves complex variables resulting from widely different participants and challenges facing an individual involved in any group interaction. See also more recent analyses about the complex interactions of different types of intelligence (e.g. Gardner 2011 [1983]).

not necessarily descriptive of cognition itself (Anderson and Sosniak 1994). Just as critically, the first and most important part of the original report nonetheless focused on what it called the cognitive domain, in line with the era's preference for equating learning with forms of knowledge construction (and not necessarily embodied human cognition), an equation called into question today with the increasing focus on the learner in sociocultural contexts—the other two domains of Bloom's *Taxonomy*.<sup>3</sup>

Despite such disputes, Bloom's *Taxonomy* remains a consistent reference point. Today's models for learning, especially in fields like foreign language education (but also in all subjects involving reading, writing, and critical thinking), now routinely describe sequences and constellations of pragmatic competencies associated with learning outcomes and learner motivation, as they also take mediality of the knowledge base (rather than items of knowledge reified into patterns) into account, differentiating, for example, between the literacies involved in reading texts and various forms of electronic media (e.g. Blake 1998; Berrett 2012). Researchers have produced abundant evidence about the ways that text and reader interact in a multifaceted and evolving mental processing that constitutes literacy, a word that has come into fashion to emphasize the *process* of learning, rather than the *product*, and to describe literacy as a lifelong task involving an individual learner's connections with the world, connections whose definitions vary widely depending on learner goals (e.g. Kramsch 2009).

In the present context, I suggest that Bloom's *Taxonomy* still needs to be part of an analysis of today's models for learning and curricular development, even if it has fallen into disrepute and disuse as a research paradigm, because its terminology and description of mental work (defined as tasks, not cognition) remains as a ghost in the educational machine and a live component of our thinking about learning as a structured process. That assertion is supported by any internet search using the term "Bloom's *Taxonomy*," which shows many teaching and learning aids that parallel the original heuristic.

Bloom's 1956 *Taxonomy* arranged the components of acts associated with learning in a sequence extending from simpler cognitive activities up through their uses as foundations for more complex ones. While often understood as based on different research and educational objectives than those of the twenty-first century (and hence on different models of what learning and cognition are), the proposals' authors recognized the enduring premise that "the simpler behaviors may be viewed as components... [that are based on] more complex behaviors" (Bloom 16).

As critics have frequently asserted, however, the sequence in the chart below has never been tested empirically. The theoretical model simply outlines the graduated complexity in the cognitive acts associated with learning as it was known at the time. They do not describe cognition as adhering to the brain or multimodal think-

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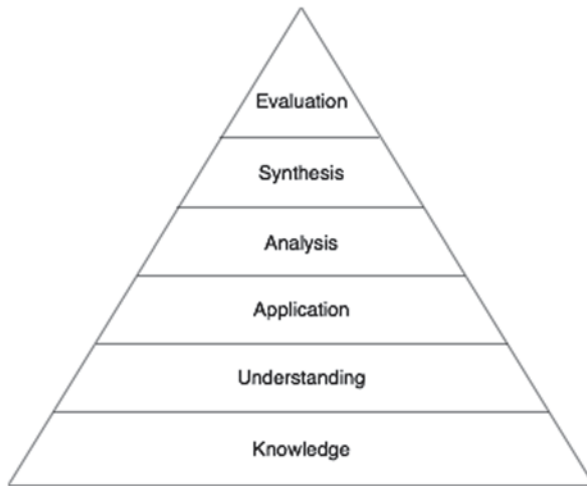
<sup>3</sup> Later illustrations of these two domains have been pivotal for FL research and learning theory. See Asher (1972), whose model of language learning through Total Physical Response reflects the value of integrating psychomotor responses to a comprehension-based model. Warner provides the current status of affective research and its significance for reading comprehension in this volume.

ing, they talk about the behaviors of learners—what they are expected to be able to manipulate in the tasks that are set in learning sequences. Usually represented as a pyramid moving from the simpler tasks at the base to the “tip” of more complex learning behaviors, I here reproduce Bloom’s original classifications in their order ranging from simplest to more complex, more concrete to more abstract:

2 The Cognitive Processes

Original classification (Bloom 18)	Parallel terms in today’s FL research
Knowledge	Background knowledge, prior verbal and non-verbal learning recalled as facts or attributes—the ability to label facts with appropriate words or expressions
Comprehension	Registering textual or visual features as meaningful, linked to prior knowledge—the ability to chain up those words in appropriate fashion, allowing for basic communication in known forms
Application	Verbal or non-verbal recall and performance ability, allowing the user to reproduce textual or visual messages in appropriate contexts and to produce basic variants
Analysis	The ability to generalize tokens to types—recognize classes of information in a visual or written text or texts as part of a larger pragmatic grid of language/symbol use
Synthesis	The ability to compare such classes of information in regard to multiple texts and with each other, and to arrive at new knowledge within existing categories/types of comprehensible performance
Evaluation	The ability to draw inferences and articulate the significance of a body of information and to assess the adequacy not only of the performance, but also with the existing typologies and categorization of tokens

More recent iterations have reversed the final two categories to reflect modern English usage (diagram below), to mix together the ideas of synthesis with the new category of “knowledge creation,” a mental activity that leads to an original contribution to the realm of knowledge in a given field. In more recent models, then, some categories have been regrouped and some have been added. The original stages identified in the standard graphic representation of Bloom’s work below have been subject to revisions and updating for the digital age but, I propose, remain fundamentally applicable today. The original taxonomy is usually depicted as follows:



As the graphic above suggests in its geometry, *levels* of difficulty remain critical to our thinking about teaching and learning, as we routinely use terminology like “higher order thinking” (or its circumlocutions as “problem solving” or “critical thinking”).<sup>4</sup> And many discussions of learning cultural phenomena today still easily pick up on all three of Bloom’s domains—sometimes by reference to other fields of theory (e.g. Bourdieu’s 1991 *habitus*, including the *hexis*, the acculturated and habituated physical bodies), but nonetheless still remaining firmly anchored in the cognitive domain for actual models of curricular practice that stress forms of logical analysis as learning goals. The taxonomies described in the Bloom Committee’s report are only one example of such hierarchies, but it remains the fundamental and perhaps most comprehensive model ever offered in US educational practice.

That today’s learning models still tacitly reference such cognitivist models for learning from the post-World-War-II environment is significant for understanding what they intend, especially given that learning hierarchies have proved themselves to be resistant to the empirical research that would establish their validities. Their focus on learning in the abstract is our necessary starting point for reanalyzing the “standard account” of the historical evolution of FL teaching and learning in the United States since WW II in brief. This analysis must necessarily take into account that the transition is still very incomplete from a model of *teaching* cognitive tasks arranged in difficulty levels like Bloom’s into a notion of *learning* as individual and individuated literacy acquisition. Being able to move from understanding a concept to applying it (in Bloom’s language) is a formal description of one dimension of a much more complex process implicated in an individual learner’s abilities to read or interpret cultural products for meaning and to draw textually substantiated inferences about the significance of that meaning for that learner, to write coher-

<sup>4</sup> A wealth of recent illustrations can be found on Google image search.

ently, and to think critically and constructively about the written and spoken word in its sociolinguistic context (Hymes 1974; Halliday 1987; Halliday and Matthiessen 2004; Hammer and Swaffar 2012).

The account I outline here is not an attempt to recoup Bloom in any of its historical adaptations, but rather to point back at the lost complexity of this model as describing what literacy means in terms of logic and cognition in the abstract, and to parse more carefully what the FL profession's 60-year history since World War II has actually accomplished in terms of redefining such formalist descriptions of learning as pertaining not simply to the structure of knowledge to be learned, but also to the learner and the pragmatic practices involved in learning language (and hence to complex cognitive, affective, and psychomotor interactions centered *on the individual learner* and *at an individuated site of learning*). That job involves recouping a more complete context for both the development and afterlife of such postwar models for learning and teaching. That recovery process is particularly critical since foreign language instruction has only recently begun to research how to integrate learning and language concerns. Such holistic approaches could then be integrated into classroom models.

The reasons for this dereliction arguably lie in the history of the profession's evolution and its research agenda since WW II. Dell Hymes' broader concept of communicative competence, introduced in the 1960s (Hymes 1966), was later expanded in FL pedagogy (Savignon 1972, 1983) by adding the idea of "communicative competence" focusing on oral expression. Whereas Hymes stressed that "communicative competence" commenced with comprehension of an utterance or text's context, FL pedagogy tended to stress communication, neglecting the basis for communicative competence, the comprehension of a text's ethnography. In so doing, the practice of FL education tended to eclipse the fact that comprehension is starting point of any learning sequence, preceding acts of language production, whether written or spoken, and thus is the companion in the process of knowledge acquisition and in literacy.

At that time, that lack of attention to comprehension was understandable, given that behaviorist theories had begun to influence FL instruction at beginning and intermediate levels under the aegis of outcomes-oriented models, connecting input with outcomes to be tested in what came to be identified in FL teaching as four observable but separated skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Today, the assumptions made by those models have been superseded in an era when researchers have, among other options, the ability to track neurological information during processing as more complex and multi-modal than behaviorism's stress on the link of stimulus to response.

Sixty years ago, however, without access to such tools, behaviorist psychologists and positivist theorists in education could assert with impunity that only separate, discrete, externalized outcomes and observable behaviors could be the measure of learning, with data collected and assessed in quantitative analyses. Such outcomes were more readily measurable than were learning processes. Thus concrete data about discrete expressions of learning were collected and evaluated as indicators of learner achievement levels. However, efforts to undertake assessments of learning



strategies (*how* learners tried to produce these outcomes), the role of student backgrounds, of first languages, of affective influences, or perceptions about FL cultures were not done because they afforded only indirect and often only descriptive data at a time prior to computer-assisted data collections and multi-variant analyses.

Today, almost 60 years later, the FL professions are at the point where cognition, affect, and psychomotor domains need to be rethought and reintegrated as part of a single literacy-based model that describes learning. The time has come to move beyond the past's disputed but persistent implementation of heuristics like Bloom's taxonomy and to reclaim its (still largely unrealized) potential—using these heuristics derived from other strategies for understanding teaching and learning in more general terms to reread paradigms for teaching and learning FLs in a more inclusive way, accounting for the learners. Integrative, language-driven paradigms for what and how a FL is learned have become increasingly relevant for a more comprehensive learning framework demanded in today's curricula and for the more diverse and globalized body of learners who engage with it as part of a twenty-first century paradigm for learner-centered and literacy-oriented education in the FLs and beyond.

For that reason the waypoints in the teaching and learning models implemented in the United States' FL instruction after World War II bear examination in some greater detail, to see how many of the still-dominant curricular and pedagogical paradigms of earlier eras helped create a situation that today threatens to marginalize FL instruction in colleges and universities rather than integrating it as central to the literacy of the university curriculum in general.

### **3 Skill Acquisition as a Learning Model: The Emergence of Technocratic Language Instruction in the United States**

The time-honored tradition of childhood learning as anchored in reading, writing, and arithmetic was still solidly at play in the United States after World War II, as the nation faced the challenge of developing a modern education system that would bring learners across measurable levels of achievement (ideally up to post-secondary education) and create the best educated workforce in the world.

Big science—science fostered by government funding and all too often driven by its politics—began its work in the public sphere after its wartime successes, as committees like that headed by Bloom emerged and standardized testing (aptitude and achievement) ruled as the benchmarks attesting to institutions' success in educating a new, mass student body. Both the procedures and the outcome data produced by such initiative fit empiricist (and usually experimentally grounded) theories that saw evidence of learning in performance rather than in less readily verifiable cognitive outcomes.

Influenced by behavioral psychology and conditioned response models that remained mainstream theories of learning through most of the 1960s, the skills-as-



performance model initially transferred to postwar FL instruction in the form of audio-lingual training—learning to speak a FL through rote repetition (as habits or “overlearning”) and learning grammar rules inductively on the basis of that repetition. Audio-lingual secondary and postsecondary textbooks (particularly the *ALM Method* series for all the major languages taught at those levels, based on structuralist approaches to describing language<sup>5</sup>) reflected practices used by the U. S. military in WW II. After the war, rote memorization was held to have inherited the cachet of the scientific empiricist methods widely respected in the 1940s and 50s: input of a certain number of hours of instructions yielded predictable outputs, judged by standardized tests.

By 1958, the Cold War political climate, with its focus on a Europe dealing with the Soviet threat, contributed to government passage of congressional funding through the National Defense Education Act (NDEA). The resulting centers for teacher training led to funding for adapting instructional programs in foreign languages along these empiricist-behaviorist models—and for claims about scientific approaches to learning as compared to older four-skills curricula.<sup>6</sup>

Political exigencies in the 1950s also had a practical impact on the constitution of FL departments: these influences changed the make-up of language department faculty for elementary and intermediate classes. Nationwide, a surge in language requirements introduced into the curriculum increased undergraduate enrollment and encouraged expansion of graduate programs, turning FL learning into a linchpin in the postwar education system of the United States (e.g. Berman 2003; Richter 2003). The NDEA centers established to train these new instructors in the audio-lingual approach later introduced other evolving pedagogies. Instead of extensive choral work in the classroom, students were sent to language labs to practice with taped language drills in a stimulus and response framework.

With burgeoning enrollments, beginning instruction now placed new demands on FL programs and tacitly gave graduate students a new role in comprehensive or research universities—the emergence of the “teaching assistant” as instructor of record in beginner and intermediate classes. In the 1960s, the faculty position of language coordinator also emerged, initially a regular faculty member who administered programs and provided supervision for growing numbers of graduate student instructors. Gradually, this role expanded, and a faculty member would generally be hired specifically to work with first and second year language programs. To

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<sup>5</sup> ALM textbooks for the major western languages were developed by the Modern Language Materials Development Center and published by Harcourt, Brace, and World starting in the 1960s, remaining in print for decades. Each chapter started with a dialogue to be memorized and performed in the aural-oral context of a language laboratory.

<sup>6</sup> Four-skills textbooks were generally characterized by chapters that focused on individual grammar topics, introduced by a dialogue and an edited reading using the respective topic (often a culture capsule or a typical student experience), and then reinforced by explicit grammar instruction referring back to the oral and printed models. In contrast, ALM was distinguished particularly by its heavy use of language labs to start each new instructional topic with an aural-oral introduction. Repetition in four-skills topics turned into drills, emphasizing automaticity in a stimulus-response model.

promote uniformity in lower-division pedagogy and assessment, such coordinators began to have weekly meetings with graduate instructors that then evolved into a required course in FL learning theory and methods. While generally not having the rank or prestige of other faculty in a FL department, the coordinator was hired not only to supervise the curriculum but also, by the 1980s, to undertake empirical research or produce “how to” or theoretical articles for education journals, visit graduate instructor classes to encourage consistent teaching practices, produce teaching materials (even textbooks) on the methods they were classroom testing and provide coherence to multi-section courses in first- and second-year levels through informal coordination and testing sessions.

By the 1980s, what had been “foreign language education” in schools of education, often defined in terms of ESL/EFL settings, found its analogue in the then almost ubiquitous efforts in FL departments to provide pedagogical training of graduate students. With that status, a new research specialty emerged, most commonly known as “applied linguistics” (e.g. Magnan 1983). Such a disciplinary evolution was necessary to upgrade the status of the faculty involved in “pedagogy” as a purely pragmatic activity and occasionally in psychometric research of the type not represented elsewhere in a typical language program of the time. Where ESL/EFL had as its focus how non-native speakers integrate into English-language environments, the goal of this new FL specialty was helping second language learners acquire the languages of countries to which they had little access other than through books and limited options for immersion, such as summer school or study abroad.

However, the traditional “graduate faculty” of the typical PhD program found it difficult to accept this new entry into their programs. In their view, upper-division and graduate courses in more traditional specializations of research and publishing (e.g. linguistics or literature) were the purview of research-oriented faculty, a definition that stressed interpretative studies or theoretical modeling rather than tracing “skills” through the curriculum. That these new “applied linguists” studied lower-division learners only reinforced curricular distinctions between so-called “lower” and “upper” division language courses.

Bloom’s taxonomies as originally applied suggest ways to understand this division as more than prejudice. The lower division was managing the cognitive domain of language learning, as it was defined until well into the 1980s: as a question of linguistic structure. The learner was believed to be able to automatize or “overlearn” the rules of the target language, prioritizing grammatical correctness as evidence of learning. At the same time, elementary stages in learning a FL became an issue of learning linguistic form rather than other contents, which cut the learning styles of the typical lower division FL classroom apart from those in the upper division—“skills” were supposed to be mastered as a prerequisite to upper division learning of content (especially literature and high-culture texts), and their transfer (the shift repeating paradigms to using them as part of authentic communication, for example, was assumed to be a natural sequence).

The definition of language at play since the 1950s continued to be compatible with the linguistics of later decades: formalist and relating to structures and their correct use, as documented in the linguistic evidence. When specialized domains of

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