

A New Perspective

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Life in the Trenches

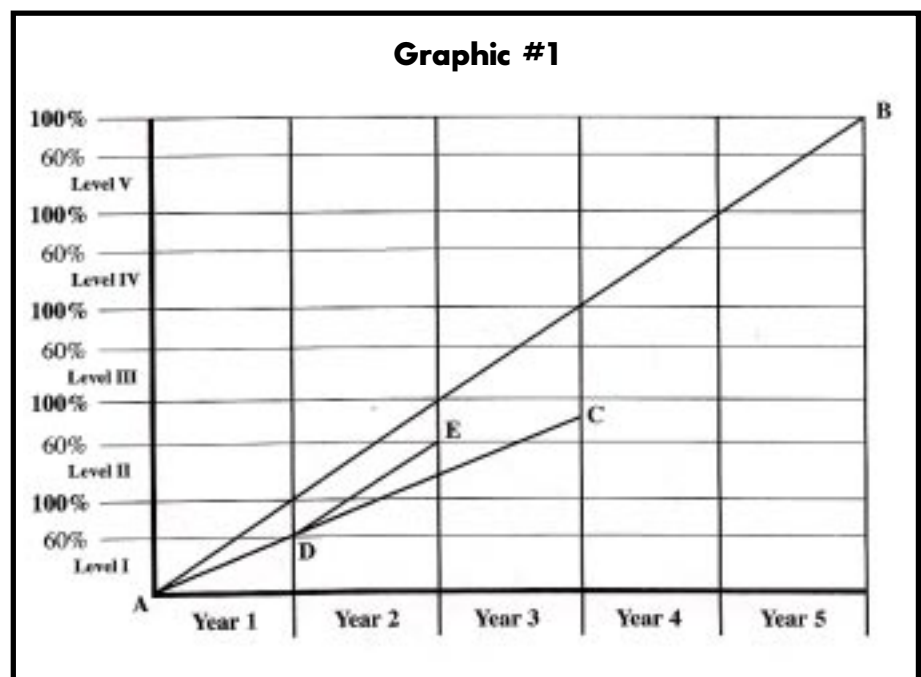
Last August, the OFLA Board crafted a new Vision Statement: Every Ohio student will be proficient in a second language, which is essential to a world-class education. I saw an immediate positive effect on our next board meeting. Discussions were focused and to the point. Decisions were made confidently. As the school year began, I wondered if our Vision Statement would have a similar effect on my day-to-day classroom teaching.

Isabelle

"My mom says I have to drop French III. It's going to ruin my GPA." I had her last year in French II and knew that she struggled to get D's. "What do you want to do?" I asked her. "I want to stay." I told her what any of us would have said: do your homework every night, ask me at least two questions a day, use your quizzes and tests to give you feedback as to adjustments you need to make in your learning. What I was thinking was: "We should not have given you credit for your work in French II." Because she was not proficient last year, she is not ready to take French III this year. Of course, she's struggling now. Of course, she has to work harder than she has ever worked before to stay in the class. Of course, despite my best efforts to give her remediation, she will drop French III.

I thought of the new OFLA Vision Statement: "Every student will be proficient." How will students be proficient in a second language at the end of high school if they receive credit when they are not proficient? The current system is flawed. Take a look at Graphic #1. The assumption

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is that, if students succeed at a 60% (or whatever the minimum passing grade is), they will have learned the course content well enough to get credit (line AD). But are they ready to continue on to the next level of a highly sequential course of study in a foreign language? Clearly no. If you follow the line to the second year (line DC), the student will fall short of the 60% needed to pass the next course. What is demanded of students is that they increase their effort to reach a passing grade during the second year (line DE). Notice that the line DE is parallel to the line AB which means that the "D" students are working just as hard as the "A" students. I remember all the students who got D's one year and decided to start really working harder in the next year. They invariably complained that they were working harder but didn't see their grades getting that much better. That's when I realized that it borders on doing an unethical act to move students on when they are not able to succeed.

We all know from our collective centuries of experience that students who maintain an A or B grade in one year are prepared for the following year. So, why don't we withhold credit from students until they demonstrate that they are proficient in all four language skills? In the few schools that have established a proficiency-based curriculum there are two major results. First, students are ready for the next level. That means that they will succeed at the next level if they continue to work as hard as they did in the previous level. Also, the range of students in each class is much narrower. Secondly, more students go on to the higher levels of a language. Students know they can choose with confidence the next level of a language. They know they are prepared to succeed at the next level.

So, what can you do if your school or district is unwilling to take such an enlightened stance on credit? What can you as an individual teacher do? Tell students from Day One and every day to strive to earn a "B" or better in all their quizzes and tests. If they ever fall below a "B," then they need to get help. Then tell them why—because they will be ready for the next year. Then when it comes time to register for next year's classes, they will sign up for the next course of the foreign language because they know they are prepared to succeed.

Gunther

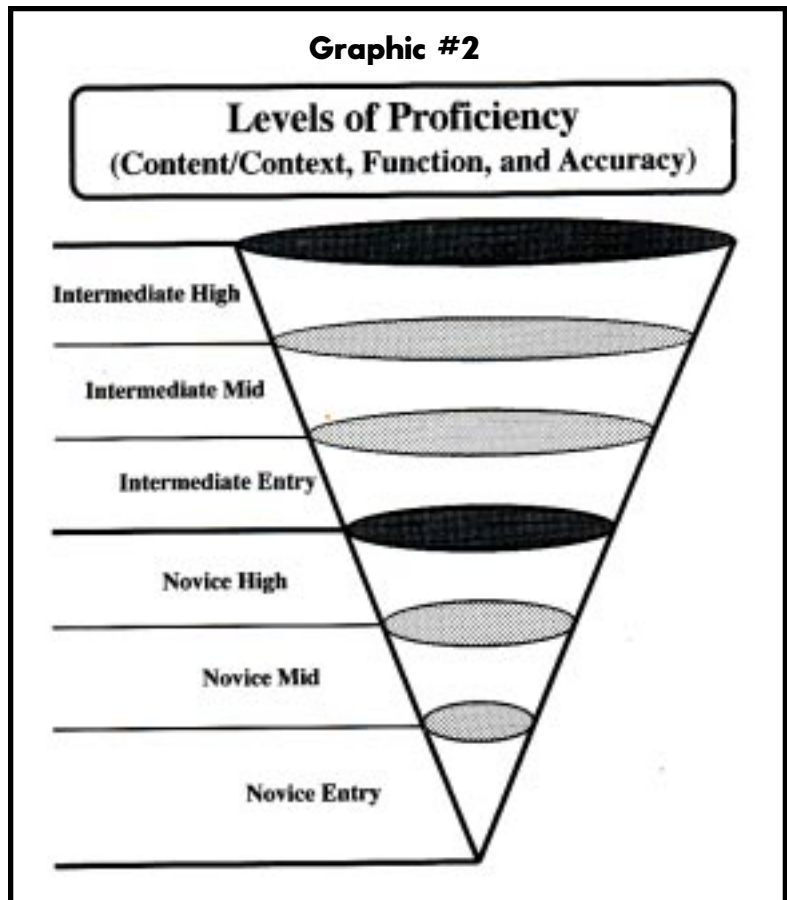
"Hey, Mr. Ballinger. How many credits do I need in a foreign language to go to college?" I was picking up my things from the French class I had just taught. My students were gone, but the students in the German class were coming in. The question came from a student I did not know, but it stopped me in my tracks. I pulled the "Levels of Profi-

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ciency" graphic (Graphic #2) off the bulletin board. I sat down next to the student. I asked him which college he planned on applying to. He didn't know. He had heard that colleges require a foreign language for admission and he wanted to know if he had enough credits. German was his second foreign language. He had taken two years of Spanish and, instead of being a strong enough student to go on to Spanish III, he decided to take German. He had heard that colleges require three years of one language or two years of two.

I knew that he was not going to like what I was about to tell him. But I only had five minutes before his class would begin, so I had to act quickly and decisively. I told him that my French III students had just done a research project in which each student contacted one in-state and one out-of-state college to ask them what the admission policies were about requiring a foreign language. They were amazed to see how varied the requirements are. Then I showed him the graphic. I told him that in the case of The Ohio State University, a student really doesn't need a foreign language to be admitted (although there is a foreign language requirement for "unconditional admission"). However, for most of the degree programs at OSU, there is a foreign language exit requirement. That means that a college student needs to demonstrate proficiency at the Intermediate High level. I pointed to the graphic. I told him that my French II students would be able to demonstrate proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and speaking at the Novice High level by the middle of the year, and that my French III students would demonstrate proficiency at the Intermediate Entry level by the end of the year. Students who continued through French V would be proficient at the Intermediate Mid level and would place out of the first three of the required four quarters of a foreign language at OSU before they began their first year at the university. There would be only one more course to take.

Then I told him the really bad news. Each course is ten weeks long. I asked him to compare that to the years he has in high school to work on his foreign language proficiency. He readily agreed that now, during



high school, is the best time to work on getting a firm foundation in a foreign language. The shock of reality had a sobering effect on him. He thanked me for my honesty.

It is time we commit ourselves to the future of our profession and, more importantly, to the best interests of Ohio's children.

Seizing the Vision

If we foreign language teachers required our students to demonstrate clearly defined levels of proficiency (see pages 13-17, "Foreign Languages: Ohio's Model Competency-Based Program"), would we pass students who are not proficient on to next level? Would we give students a smattering of many languages and call that a part of a foreign language curriculum? Would we take one year's content, spread it over two years, and then give students two credits for foreign language study? Would we wait until students are 12 years of age or older before beginning to teach them another language? Would we track students into regular and enriched classes and give students in each class the same credit? I don't think so.

These are dangerous times for foreign language teachers. We have always had to fight for relevancy in the school curriculum. The Vision Statement gives us a chance to speak with one voice and assert our mission to the public at large. It is time we commit ourselves to the future of our profession and, more importantly, to the best interests of Ohio's children.

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