

# **Language Teaching and Learning**

## **10 Axioms and their Corollaries**

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“The limits of my language define the  
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Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1921

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Assuming that anyone who speaks a  
language is qualified to teach it ...  
is like assuming that anyone with teeth is  
qualified to be a dentist.

$$(\text{Language}) \times (\text{Teaching}) \times (\text{Learning}) \\ = \text{Complexity}^3$$

- **Language teaching is a professional discipline that has:**

- Defined standards of success.
- A well-established history of people attaining those standards by extending “a tremendous amount of effort exerted over many years.”

Erickson and Pool, *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise*, 2016

- A foundation of scientific research.
- Professional journals and publications.
- Graduate degree programs.
- A culture of sharing our expertise.

In this “spirit of sharing” here are my:

**Top 10 Axioms**  
**of Language Teaching and Learning**  
**(with some associated corollaries)**

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# Top 10 Axioms of Language Teaching and Learning

(with some associated corollaries)

**These axioms will be presented in a  
“countdown” sequence from 10 to 1.**

# Axiom 10

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**Corollary 10a.** Without defined course learning outcomes and corresponding tests, every teaching method can claim to be the best method.

- Language teaching can always be done cheaper, if it is done worse.
- The use of methods such as suggestopedia, accelerated learning, alpha brain wave biofeedback, and similar techniques has never produced learners with unrehearsed, functional language proficiency.



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Corollary 10a. Without defined course learning outcomes and corresponding tests, every teaching method can claim to be the best method.

**Corollary 10b.** The most efficient path to high levels of language proficiency is to teach both communication functions and their linguistic forms at the same time.

- Focusing on form without function is a detour that produces:  
Learners with accurate, but limited communication skills.
- Focusing on function without form is a dead end that creates:  
“Terminal 2s” who are fluent but highly inaccurate.

# Axiom 9

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**Corollary 8a.** Aptitude can be defined as the amount of time it will take a person to learn something.

- At the program level, students’ aptitude makes a measurable difference in average program outcomes.

## Axiom 9

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**Corollary 8a.** Aptitude can be defined as the amount of time it will take a person to learn something.

**Corollary 8b.** Learner motivation can be measured by the amount of time the learner is willing to devote to the learning task.

- At the individual level, high motivation can result in persistent individual effort, which can compensate for low aptitude.

## Axiom 8

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**Corollary 9a.** To become more proficient in your L<sub>2</sub> than in your L<sub>1</sub>, requires learning more about the L<sub>2</sub> than you know about your L<sub>1</sub>.

- In 2015, BYU conducted an exploratory study with 103 college students who were native speakers of English.
- Their tested speaking proficiency results in English were:
  - Level 3: 79
  - Level 2+: 22
  - Level 2: 2
- All had lived about 2 years in Spanish-speaking areas and had taken advanced Spanish classes.
  - 100 (97%) tested lower in Spanish than in English, their L<sub>1</sub>.
  - Only 3 students tested at the same level in both languages.
    - 2 tested at Level 2+ in both languages.
    - 1 tested at Level 2 in both languages.

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**Corollary 7b. For language learning there are three major combinations of cognition and knowledge:**

- Direct Application Learning. ( Aligns  $\approx$  with Level 1 )  
Memorize and remember factual knowledge.
- Near Transfer Learning. ( Aligns  $\approx$  with Level 2 )  
Understand and apply conceptual knowledge.
- Far Transfer Learning. ( Aligns  $\approx$  with Level 3 )  
Analyze, evaluate, and create metacognitive knowledge.

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**Corollary 6b.** Learning to speak at high proficiency levels focuses attention on L<sub>2</sub>-specific features that are not found in the learners' L1 – features that carry essential meaning.

- Once the learners internalize those features, their listening comprehension increases.
- A year-long study that compared Russian “Listening Course” graduates with Russian “Speaking Course” graduates, found that the “Speakers” had higher listening comprehension scores than did the listeners.

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- At one large government language school in the United States, because of the high cost of testing speaking proficiency and the high correlation between listening proficiency and speaking proficiency, it was decided to stop testing speaking ability.
- Within just a few years, students' speaking abilities had essentially disappeared.

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Corollary 5a. What isn't tested won't be learned.

**Corollary 5b.** A non-alignment of the desired course outcomes with the tests used in the course reduces student motivation.

- Teaching for proficiency and then testing for achievement reduces students' understanding of the language learning process and lowers their motivation.
- Teaching for achievement and then testing for proficiency frustrates students' and lowers their motivation to learn.

Axiom 4

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**Corollary 4a.** The hypothesized “natural acquisition order” of languages is overshadowed by similarities between the  $L_1$  and the  $L_2$ , by differences between the  $L_1$  and the  $L_2$ , by instructional emphases, and by individual learning differences.

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**Corollary 4b.** Learners may develop partial control of some Level 3 language features before they demonstrate sustained mastery of Level 2 language functions, but learners don't master Level 3 before they master Level 2.

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**Corollary 3a.** A plus level does not have its own separate combination of tasks, contexts, and accuracy expectations that is independent of the base levels.

- Blended plus-level texts with elements from more than one level exist.
- But there are no plus-level tasks.

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**Corollary 3a.** A plus level does not have its own separate combination of tasks, contexts, and accuracy expectations that is independent of the base levels.

**Corollary 3b.** Plus levels describe the ability level of people who are close to – but haven't yet mastered the next higher proficiency level.

- Someone who functions at Level 2 most of the time, but who does not function consistently at Level 2, is a 1+.
- Someone who functions at Level 3 most of the time, but who does not function consistently at Level 3, is a 2+.

Axiom 2

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# Teachers are essential for advanced language learning.

**Corollary 2a.** Advanced language learning requires personalized instruction, coaching, and feedback that is timely, accurate, and informative.

- Computer generated feedback, such as “Wrong, try again.” is not sufficiently informative for learners to improve their performance.
- Self study is mostly ineffective, because learners don’t know what they don’t know.

## Axiom 2

### **Teachers are essential for advanced language learning.**

Corollary 2a. Advanced language learning requires personalized instruction, coaching, and feedback that is timely, accurate, and informative.

**Corollary 2b. Professional teachers not only know WHAT to teach, they know HOW, WHY, and WHEN to teach WHAT to WHOM.**

- It is impossible to write the pedagogical savvy and judgement of expert teachers into any curriculum.
- Despite claims of developing “fluency”, commercial language programs don’t go beyond Level 1.



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Corollary 2a. Advanced language learning requires coaching and teacher feedback that is timely, accurate, and informative.

Corollary 2b. Professional teachers not only know WHAT to teach, they know HOW, WHY, and WHEN to teach WHAT to WHOM.

**Corollary 2c. The further the teacher is removed from the learning process, the less the students learn.**

- Social interaction is an essential element of language use.
- Education specialist have proven that “teacher immediacy” improves student motivation and learning.
- Social scientists have shown that the classroom environment creates “propinquity” – a closeness and affinity that makes learning more effective.

And finally, Axiom 1 or...

“Clifford’s 1<sup>st</sup> Law of Learning”...



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**Corollary 1b.** It takes longer to progress from Level 2 to Level 3 than it takes to progress from Level 1 to Level 2.

# Axiom 1

**The more content there is to learn, the longer it will take to learn it.**

Corollary 1a. It takes longer to learn linguistically distant languages than to learn similar languages.

Corollary 1b. It takes longer to progress from Level 2 to Level 3 than it takes to progress from Level 1 to Level 2.

**Corollary 1c. There are no shortcuts to high levels of proficiency.**

- Attaining Level 3 language proficiency means becoming an expert.
- According to Erickson and Poole, becoming an expert requires:
  - Devoting the time needed to become an expert, which might be 10,000 hours.
  - Spending that time on guided learning with deliberate practice.
  - Receiving regular coaching from experts.

Thank you for allowing me to share my Top 10 Language Teaching and Learning Axioms.

I look forward to receiving your feedback.

