

Erwin Tschorner

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Abstract:

The article summarizes the most significant contributions of Erwin Tschorner, a leading German applied linguist. Tschorner is Gerhard-Helbig-Professor of German as a Foreign Language at the Herder Institute of the University of Leipzig. He has done pioneering work in the fields of L2 grammar acquisition, computer-assisted language learning and teaching, corpus linguistics, assessment and the development of oral proficiency in L2 as well as foreign language educational policy. Each of the five main sections of the article focusses on one of the areas and provides an overview of Tschorner's work.

Key words:

applied linguistics, computer-assisted language learning and teaching, corpus linguistics, foreign language educational policy, grammar acquisition language testing, oral proficiency

Erwin Tschorner is a German applied linguist and an internationally recognized authority on foreign language learning, methodology, corpus linguistics, testing, and materials design. Currently, he holds the position of Gerhard-Helbig-Professor of German as a Foreign Language and Applied Linguistics at the Herder Institute of the University of Leipzig (since 1998). He is also an Associated Professor of German Studies at the University of Arizona, USA (since 2001) and a Professor Titular at the Universidad de Guadalajara, Mexico (since 2008).

Erwin Tschorner received his M.A. in German Studies from the University of Colorado, Boulder, in 1984 and his PhD. in German Linguistics from the University of California in Berkeley in 1988. He started his career as a lecturer at the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures at the University of Michigan and was later an Assistant and Associate Professor of German at the University of Iowa (1990–1998). In addition, he has been a visiting professor or lecturer at various universities around the world, for example, in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, China, Cuba, Germany and the U.S. From 2004 to 2008, he held the post of Dean of the Faculty of Philology at the University of Leipzig.

Tschirner has made significant contributions and often accomplished pioneering work in the fields of grammar acquisition, computer-assisted language learning and teaching as well as corpus linguistics, with a focus on German as a second or foreign language. He has initiated fundamental advances and conducted extensive research in the areas of assessing and developing oral proficiency in L2 as well as in foreign language educational policy. In the following sections, each of these areas will be addressed in detail.

Grammar acquisition

Since the beginning of his career, Tschirner's main focus has been on grammar and grammar instruction. Following in the footsteps of linguists such as Sharwood Smith (1993) and Ellis

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(1996), Tschorner argues that the distinction between implicit and explicit learning, which goes along with the distinction between procedural (knowing how) and declarative (knowing that) knowledge (Anderson, 1976), is of the utmost importance for language teaching and learning. According to this view, there is a qualitative difference between metalinguistic knowledge about grammar as described in grammar books and mediated through explicit grammar instruction and the psycholinguistic grammar system in learners' minds as acquired through implicit learning. Consequently, grammatical competence cannot develop through the transition of explicitly learnt rules into implicit knowledge, because these two types of knowledge exist separately and independently. This is in sharp contrast with the assumptions of second language didactics, which typically advocate that explicitly taught and consciously learnt grammar rules turn into implicit, automatized knowledge through practice. It also means that our grammatical awareness and metalinguistic knowledge do not directly affect our ability to speak correctly, for example.

An important school of thought in linguistics and applied linguistics to which Tschorner adheres argues that grammatical competence is acquired by storing well-formulated concrete examples of situated language sequences of varying sizes (Pawley – Syder, 1983; Ellis, 1996). On the basis of these sequences of sounds and words, learners build up knowledge of what kinds of sequences of sounds and words are possible in a particular language and which ones are more frequent than others. Simultaneously, they also build up even more abstract knowledge about words such as word class and associated grammatical features. The development of this abstract grammatical knowledge thus takes place automatically and implicitly, i.e., without conscious knowledge, and requires the storage of very large numbers of phrases and partial and complete sentences (see also Wong-Fillmore, 1976; Nattinger – DeCarrico, 1992; Sharwood Smith, 1993; Ellis, 1996).

In order to gain maximum profit from the language input, so that a maximum of information can be stored, the learner needs to process it in its linguistic richness. However, neither first nor second language users rely primarily on a linguistic model when comprehending in authentic language use situations, but in fact are more likely to use comprehension strategies, i.e., they rely on syntactic and semantic clues or background or world knowledge (Clark – Clark, 1977). The use of this strategy may, in fact, prevent the input from being processed in linguistic ways with the consequence that although comprehension is achieved, no actual language was learned.

Tschirner argues that the fact that language classrooms enable and invite teachers and learners to focus on formal aspects of the language is conducive to processing input linguistically and that this "attention to form" may be one of the central advantages classroom learning has over "natural" learning environments.

Input enhancement (Sharwood Smith, 1993) is a technique that draws students' attention explicitly to formal features of the input. As students understand the meaning of a particular sentence while registering and processing the linguistic input in its entirety, they store language samples that are of the necessary high quality and completeness needed to yield correct assumptions about the target language when they are later analysed.¹

1 In addition to *input enhancement*, the terms *input processing* (VanPatten – Cadierno, 1993) and *focus on form* (Long – Robinson, 1998) are found in the literature. What is common to all three terms is the focusing of learner attention on the language itself and not on its meaning or message. While *input enhancement* is what teachers and materials developers do to make elements to be learned more prominent, *focus on form* and *input processing* is what learners do when they pay attention to the language itself.

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In analogy to *input enhancement*, Tschirner proposes to name the attempt to help students to store high quality expressive exemplars of the second language *output enhancement*: Students practice communication and the exchange of ideas with prefabricated phrases and sentences and are thus aided in using chunks of language that are fully understood and that are as close to native speaker norms in pronunciation, grammar, and idiomticity as possible.

Tschirner contributed to the ongoing discussion on the role of grammar in SLA (Bygate – Tonkyns – Williams, 1994; Gnutzmann – Königs, 1995) with several articles (especially Tscherirner, 1997; 1999; 2001; 2003) in which he further develops his notion of the approach to language learning described above.

His differentiation between different grammars is finer grained than the dichotomic distinction between explicit and implicit grammar and close to Helbig (1992) or Tonkyn (1994). It involves (1) the *primary grammar*, the grammatical knowledge learned intuitively while acquiring one's native language and developed primarily by listening and speaking, (2) the *literacy grammar*, the grammatical knowledge learned both consciously and intuitively while becoming literate in one's first language and developed primarily by reading and writing, and (3) the *linguistic grammar*. While linguistic grammars are based on "logical" descriptions of static relationships between words, phrases, and sentences, mental grammars are dynamic systems of procedures and strategies under construction with constraints on what can be integrated at any given stage of development. Moreover, linguistic grammars are usually based on the "best" texts highly articulate writers of a given society are able to produce after many revisions and much thought, while mental grammars need to be able to deal with real-time language processing and production.

Following the argument that processing builds competence, Tschirner argues that different skills/processes rest on different competencies even though it seems clear that the grammatical competencies associated with each skill must, at least partially, overlap. Tschirner proposes that for L2 teaching and learning purposes, the skills division should be subsumed under the process/product division, and that there should be a distinction between the three types of grammar in foreign language teaching: a primary or speaking grammar, a literacy or writing grammar, and a linguistic or reading grammar. This does not mean that textbooks or teachers should present three different grammatical models each with its own metalinguistic terminology, but rather that there would be different goals for different grammars, with different approaches, tasks, and levels of concreteness to achieve these goals.

In such a scenario, the primary grammar would be taught implicitly and orally, i.e., there is an underlying grammatical scope and sequence for tasks and activities but there is no explicit presentation and application of rules. The progression is flat with particular structures being recycled often with a focus on particular communicative purposes. The most important feature of all primary grammar tasks, however, is that they work with oral texts using input and output enhancement techniques with a concrete focus on form.

The literacy grammar would be a writing grammar. Depending on learners' age, educational background, etc., it might progress in tandem with the speaking grammar or it might be delayed. The main contribution of the writing grammar, at least in beginning language instruction, would be to add precision and breadth. Thus, while covering the same topic as the speaking grammar, e.g. the uses of the present tense, it might add additional uses and offer fuller paradigms than the speaking grammar.

The linguistic grammar would be a reading grammar. While the speaking and writing grammar might essentially focus on the same topics and be treated in the same chapter section,

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the reading grammar should follow its own course and its progression could be similar to present grammar progressions in textbooks. It would focus on bottom-up strategies that draw attention to grammatical cues for the creation of meaning and it would teach students how to analyse and discuss grammar by introducing metalinguistic terminology. What it would not do is to ask students to produce sentences. While the speaking and to some extent the writing grammar would essentially be limited by what students are able to do at any given point in time, the reading grammar could forge ahead for conceptual and receptive control of more difficult topics.

Tschirner assumes that the scenario described above could remedy the unhappy state of affairs when learners are unable to master, in any meaningful sense of the word, a large portion of the grammar they are expected to learn, which often leads to frustration for both students and instructors, both at the lower levels of language instruction as well as at the upper levels of literature and culture studies. There are even clear indications (Diehl, 1991; Diehl et al., 2000; Pienemann, 1984) that the serious grammatical overload in foreign language classrooms may prevent learners from consolidating their ability to control lower-order grammatical structures, thus preventing them from acquiring higher-order ones. Tschirner is also convinced that item learning is superior to system learning as far as the productive skills are concerned, and that the ability to speak and write grammatically correctly is mostly acquired when words are perceived, noticed, used, and learned functionally in richly stimulating and authentic language encounters such as watching films, reading novels and newspapers, and in conversations and discussions with native speakers of the target language. Though far from denying the benefits of the focus on form (in the sense of focus on single words and their grammatical features, rather than abstract focus on grammar as traditionally taught), Tschirner is of the opinion that it must be accompanied by much larger amounts of experience in language use, both receptive and productive.

Computer-Assisted Language Learning/Teaching

Tschirner's interest and work in the field of computer-assisted language learning and teaching (CALL) emerges naturally out of his opinions concerning grammar acquisition. As outlined in the previous section, while acknowledging the benefits of a focus on formal aspects of language, Tschirner insists that learners need to be exposed to large amounts of high quality communicative situations in which meaning and message are foregrounded, in order to acquire procedural/implicit knowledge of grammar.

Instructional technologies can contribute to the creation of such learning conditions, thus leading to more effective learning. Tschirner focuses especially on the benefits of digital video (see below) and audio, which may contribute to grammatically correct speaking. They enable the storage of meaningful auditory pieces of language, the later analysis of which leads to the development of the corresponding competence. In this context, Tschirner emphasizes the crucial role of authentic language in SLA. It is usually the only source which provides input that is rich enough for SLA to occur because it ideally combines phonetic, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, and sociocultural features.

In several articles (e.g. Tschirner, 1997a; 1999a; 1999b; 2000; 2001a), Tschirner points out the numerous advantages of multimedia computers, which can make spoken language more

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easily perceptible. Since digital data are eminently controllable, even spoken language may be manipulated for and by the learner in a way previously only possible with written language.

The focus on form may be established by foregrounding linguistic features of the input through repetition, visualization, and execution of tasks that draw students' attention to them. An abstract focus may be added where students analyse and categorize linguistic features using linguistic concepts and terminology. In addition, students can engage in communicative speaking experiences with the structures introduced in listening. These speaking experiences should move from more guided, e.g., information-gap activities and structured interviews, to less guided ones, e.g., role-plays and free conversation, and involve both input and output enhancement.

Written texts may be approached similarly to oral ones, taking advantage of the layered information of hypermedia. Words can be glossed, visualized, or translated when clicked, grammatical relationships between sentence elements can be highlighted and/or explained, and additional grammatical explanations may be provided for those seeking more comprehensive answers.

IT may play a useful role in writing as well, both in composition and in interactive writing. There are a number of writing tools that come with regular text processing software such as a spell checker, a grammar checker, and a thesaurus. These are very useful in the amount of feedback and writing help they provide. It has been also observed (Kern, 1995; Rösler, 2004) that computer-mediated communication (CMC) offers more frequent opportunities for student expression and leads to more language production than oral discussions in the classroom. Sullivan and Pratt (1996) counted teachers' and students' turns in a conversation group and in a CMC group and found that while only 35% of turns were from learners in the first group, in the second group, the percentage was as high as 85%. Moreover, students' CMC language is typically of an overall higher level of sophistication, in terms of the range of its morphosyntactic features and in terms of the variety of discourse functions expressed. This is most likely due to the fact that planning time is increased, compared to oral contributions to discussions, which allows students to take more risks and makes them more willing to stretch their language to explore new structures.

One of Tschirner's central interests in the field of CALL is the work with digital video. He points out that while much attention has been paid to written communication, both synchronous (chat) and asynchronous (e-mail), the acquisition of oral skills and listening comprehension has stayed in the background of research interests. In his own works (e.g. Tschorner, 1997a; 1999; 2000; 2010), he underscores the advantages digital video has for language learning: Discrete words, phrases, and sentences may be isolated and repeated as often as needed, utterances may be combined with visual information and simultaneously read and listened to. With the help of a broad selection of tasks and tools, it is possible to separate syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features so that they can each be observed individually, yet without reducing language to discrete words or sentences existing in a communicative and cultural void. Spoken language can be slowed down and listened to multiple times, unveiling yet more layers of signs and meanings. Discrete features and structures can be highlighted so that they are noticed, processed, and learned. Before the advent of computer-controlled video, spoken language, especially for beginners, was simply too fast, too rich, and too complex for learners to notice more than perhaps a few prominent syllables or words.

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In his most recent article, Tschirner (2010) is primarily concerned with the question of how video clips should be used in the classroom and at home, how they should be selected and how they should be presented so that students are not overwhelmed and frustrated but rather excited and motivated. He develops principles for selection, such as relevance, validity, and interactivity, and presents a general approach to working with video clips that combines both input and output activities to enhance second language acquisition. Though he focuses primarily on language learning, he points out that working with video clips holds great promise for cultural learning as well.

According to Tschirner, the primary reason for working with video clips for language learning is the additional focus on form it may provide. Because it is very difficult to focus on form when listening for comprehension, video clips must be shown several times to focus on different kinds of input properties, including form. Therefore, these clips should be relatively short or should be divided into brief segments of a few minutes each.

Tschirner suggests the following steps for working with videos: a first step that establishes the meaning of the video going from the visual information to global and then detailed text comprehension; a second step in which particular attention is paid to the language used so that word forms in context may be noticed, processed, and stored, and links with meanings may be strengthened; and a third and fourth step, in which new elements are practiced communicatively, first within a controlled environment and then in free conversation.

Tschirner's suggestions for work with digital video are not only grounded in careful theoretical considerations which take into account psycholinguistic theories of language production (e.g. the Levelt model, Levelt, 1989) and acquisition, but also in long practical experience in this field. He designed a DVD, an interactive CD-ROM and Interactive Online Learning Center to the textbook of German as a foreign language, *Kontakte: A Communicative Approach*, of which he is the first author. He also served as the editor and one of the authors of the online German course *Deutsch interaktiv* of the *Deutsche Welle* (Tschirner, 2006). In addition, he initiated a teaching module (a set of three courses) on digital media in language learning/teaching in his department and gives presentations and seminars that focus on task-based methods in language teaching and especially on work with video in teaching praxis.

In addition to his important role in CALL research and in developing multimedia materials, Tschirner has also significantly contributed to the arousal of interest in CALL in Germany and to the better dissemination of research results in this field. At the turn of the millennium, he initiated a nation-wide discussion on the role of digital media in language classrooms. In 1999, he coordinated a special issue of the German journal *Fremdsprachen Lehren und Lernen* (Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages), which was devoted to that topic. In his introductory article, which to some degree is a summary of the main topics of the issue, Tschirner points out the way digital media promote learners' autonomy and the relationship between cognitive and constructivist approaches, which has been characteristic of the first phase of theoretical thinking on the topic.

In 2002, Tschirner (together with Dietmar Rösler) initiated a new debate, this time with an article in the journal *Deutsch als Fremdsprache* (German as a Foreign Language). The article summarizes the preceding years' research results in the CALL field in Germany and points out desiderata for future research, especially in the areas of learning processes (e.g. the relationship between increasing individualisation and growing opportunities for cooperative

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learning), teacher education (e.g. the changes in the learner-teacher division of roles) and of developing new concepts of learning materials and classrooms. Tschirner's and Rösler's article found lively resonance not only in Germany, but also abroad, and initiated a series of articles on the topic.

Corpus Linguistics

Performance oriented approaches with emphasis on authentic data drew Tschirner's attention to another linguistic discipline with a similar perspective, namely corpus linguistics.

According to Tschirner and in agreement with current SLA theories (cf. VanPatten – Williams, 2007), language input supplies the brain with raw data, from which the mental language system is then constructed. Language acquisition is thus to a significant degree also a statistical learning problem (cf. Ellis, 2007). Conscious learning helps to draw learners' attention to language regularities (*focus on form*), which might have otherwise stayed unnoticed or become noticed only much later.

A fluent transition between lexis and grammar ("syntax is driven by lexis", Francis, 1993) is also one of the core assumptions of corpus linguistics. Both SLA theories and corpus linguistics agree that frequency plays a crucial role for both vocabulary and grammar acquisition, which has important implications for language instruction. For example, if chunk learning results in the construction of intuitive procedural mental grammar once sufficient amounts of equivalent sequences have been stored from which grammatical regularities can be derived (see above in the section on grammar), then frequently occurring chunks in language usage (or their analysis) could be used to support or to speed up grammar acquisition.

One of the questions occupying researchers in SLA (Ellis, 1996; Sinclair, 1991; Nattinger – DeCarrico; 1992; Nation, 2001) is the frequency distribution in the languages to be learnt. Frequency effects not only influence L2 acquisition on all language levels, but in addition to this, the variable "vocabulary size" affects how fluently and with how much understanding L2 learners may read authentic L2 texts, and especially whether the meaning of unknown words can be derived from context and whether such words can be learnt incidentally (Nation, 2001). For ESL, it is assumed, contrary to earlier claims, that 95% or more of the word forms of a text must be known (Carver, 1994; Laufer, 1997; Hu – Nation, 2000; Quian, 2002), so that new words can be understood and learnt implicitly. According to Laufer (1997), not less than the 5 000 most frequent lexemes are necessary to gain coverage of 95% of the word forms in an average English newspaper text. Tschirner belongs to an expanding group of researchers in SLA who argue that frequency lists of the learnt/taught languages should form the basis for determining which vocabulary should be taught at which language level, so that learners can understand as much as possible with as few words and in as little time as possible.

Given the importance of empirically grounded frequency lists for language instruction, it is astonishing that until 2006, the only such frequency dictionary for German dated from 1897 (Kaeding, 1897). In 2006, Johnson and Tschirner published the *Frequency Dictionary of German*, thus satisfying the long-lasting demand and correcting the deficit.

The frequency dictionary is based on the Herder-BYU corpus of the German language, which was also initiated and designed by Tschirner. The aim was to create a modern corpus of contemporary German, which is representative, balanced, and of sufficient size to fulfil its purpose, but at the same time to make its manual editing manageable. Consequently, the size

of the corpus was set at 4 200 000 word forms. The resulting Frequency Dictionary comprises the 4 000 most frequent lexemes of the German language. (The 4 000th lexeme still appears 68 times in the corpus.)

To achieve representativity, five main text genres which are typically represented in most large corpora (Kunkel-Razum, 2003), i.e. newspaper texts, academic texts, literary texts, functional texts and spoken language, are covered by the corpus, each of them by 1 000 000 word forms, with the exception of functional texts, covered by 200 000 word forms. In all subcorpora, the ratio between German, Austrian and Swiss texts is approximately 70:20:10.

Table 1: Text coverage of selected genres of the Herder-BYU corpus by the most frequent 4 000 German words (adapted from Tschirner, 2009)

Genre	1 000	2 000	3 000	4 000	+ propria
Spoken language	85,2	89,2	90,9	91,9	93,1
Literary works	74,5	80	82,7	84,5	88,6
Newspaper	67,4	73,9	77,3	79,4	86,9
Specialized texts	67,6	74,7	78,5	80,7	82,8

Table 1 presents the data from a text coverage study by Tschirner (2009) for German. It clearly shows that even the 4 000 most frequent words barely reach the 95% coverage threshold for fluent reading with good understanding as transmitted by studies in ESL acquisition. The numbers also demonstrate how eminently important a role vocabulary size plays for reading.

In several of his studies (see also the section on assessing and developing oral proficiency below), Tschirner shows that even extended sequences of L2 instruction do not enable students to meet necessary and/or required vocabulary thresholds. In his 2004 study, for example, he explored vocabulary gains over eight years of English language instruction in secondary schools in Sachsen (Germany). The study reveals that 78% of students of English, English Studies (Anglistik) and American Studies had a reading vocabulary of only 2 000 words at the beginning of their studies. 28% had a vocabulary of 3 000 words and 21% of 5 000 words. This means that only every fourth student had the necessary reading vocabulary. Tschirner concludes that school and universities need to focus more on vocabulary learning and vocabulary learning strategies. Moreover, there is increasing evidence that direct vocabulary learning is important even for advanced learners because they significantly differ from native speakers in noticing, guessing ability, the guessing retention link, and cumulative gain (Laufer, 2003).

Tschirner also performed an analysis of several basic vocabularies for learning German and discovered that in *Profile Deutsch*, for example, the vocabulary lists for the levels A1–B1 include 40% of words which are not among the 4 000 most frequent German words. Tschirner points out that the real problem is not the words which the lists include, but the words which they do not include: 55% of the 1 000 most frequent German words are not listed in *Profile Deutsch* A1–B1 (productive). These results show how important corpus studies are for designing effective teaching materials.

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Aligning the progression in vocabulary learning with the frequency of introduced words is, according to Tschirner, one of the ways to improve language instruction following the results of corpus linguistic studies as outlined above. Tschirner argues that learners need to reach a vocabulary of at least 4 000 words, in order to be able to enlarge it through implicit vocabulary learning while reading, and that it is important that they are not just any 4 000 German words, but really the 4 000 most frequent words (for example, words with a frequency of 16 000 to 20 000 cover together only 1% of a text). In direct vocabulary learning especially, the cost-benefit ratio, i.e. how much the acquisition of a word costs and how much benefit knowing the word brings, is one of the most important criteria. Consequently, it does not seem meaningful or beneficial to acquire words in incidental order, but rather to focus on the most frequent words first.

As in the field of CALL, Tschirner has initiated important discussions about corpus linguistics in foreign language learning and teaching. In 2007, Tschirner, together with Christian Fandrych, gave impetus to a series of publications on the role of corpus linguistics in German as a foreign language by publishing a summarizing paper on this topic in the journal *Deutsch als Fremdsprache* and explicitly inviting other researchers and teachers to a discussion. In the paper, they demonstrated how corpus driven studies might contribute to better understanding of L2 acquisition, including both its organisational (phonetic-phonological competence, grammatical competence, lexical competence) and pragmatic aspects (functional and sociolinguistic competence), to better understanding of central input properties that affect acquisition (salience, frequency, and complexity) and to better language instruction. The authors highlight both the achievements to date and the desiderata for future research. The paper found a wide resonance among the addressed audience and the number of corpus-based studies in German as a foreign language has increased significantly in the last few years.

To support frequency based teaching and learning, Tschirner recently initiated a new series of basic vocabulary books including workbooks in a number of languages such as German, English, Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese, and Russian (Tschirner, 2008; 2010).

Assessing and developing oral proficiency and test research

The reliable assessment of oral proficiency and its development as well as test research in general are other core topics of Tschirner's research. On the theoretical level, Tschirner explores the various elements of oral tests that play a role when designing oral proficiency tests. In his 2001b paper, for example, he uses the notion of test usefulness developed by Bachman and Palmer (1996) with its interlocking elements of validity, reliability, authenticity, interactivity, practicality and washback as point of departure to discuss several components of oral tests: the construct, the testing procedure, and the rating procedure. He is concerned with various approaches to establishing construct validity (e.g. designing a theoretical model of second language proficiency and completing a needs analysis for performance assessment), with task development and test structure, with rating criteria, the rating procedure and tester and rater training programs. In his studies, he also analyzed several established tests for German and English as second languages (e.g. Kenyon – Tschirner, 2000), focusing on issues such as interrater reliability, the quality of scoring, equivalence between tests etc. The tests include for example the *Zertifikat Deutsch*, developed by the Goethe Institute, the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)

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and the Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI), developed by the Center for Applied Linguistics.

Tschirner focuses especially on the OPI in its 1999 version, analyzing it theoretically (e.g. Kenyon – Tschirner, 2000; Tschirner, 2001b) and using it in his own research (Tschirner – Heilenman, 2006; Tschirner, 2007). The OPI is a direct test of speaking, conducted as a face-to-face or telephone interview during which the interviewer follows a prescribed procedure for assessing the candidate's oral proficiency level as defined by the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Guidelines.² Each OPI interview is recorded and rated by one or more certified testers. Currently, OPIs are conducted in over 80 different languages. Tschirner has been a tester and tester trainer for the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview since 1989 and 1993, respectively.

Tschirner employs this test also when investigating another central issue in this area, namely the match/mismatch between expected proficiency levels (to pass the final high school exam, to be accepted at university, to become a language teacher etc.) and the actually achieved levels. He considers it of utmost importance to have a clear sense of what proficiency levels are possible, given the amount and the kind of instruction commonly available at high school and university level. For example, a minimally acceptable oral proficiency level for high school foreign language teachers in the U.S. has been set at AL (Advanced Low) by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). However, as revealed by a number of studies including Tschirner (2007), this level is not commonly reached at the end of an undergraduate foreign language major even with a study abroad period. Similarly, the median proficiency of students after four semesters of college German is IL, though the expected level is IM. A related question is the length of time needed to move from one level to the next and the linguistic features of learner languages at various levels. Based on studies focusing on oral proficiency gains with and without a year or semester abroad (for summaries see for example Collentine – Freed, 2004; Rifkin, 2003; Tschirner – Heilenman, 1998; Swender, 2003), it appears that it usually takes the education of an undergraduate foreign language major with a year-long study abroad experience to reach the Advanced level.

Tschirner points out the lack of studies that explicitly focus on oral proficiency levels in relationship to length of instruction and the need for more research in this area. He mentions several underestimated problems such as heterogeneous proficiency levels typically observed at almost all class levels or the fact that it may take longer to reach a particular proficiency level in one language than in another (cf. the language difficulty scale established informally by the U.S. Foreign Service Institute, Thompson, 1996).

Tschirner also argues that in order to achieve the expected or even the required proficiency levels within a given time period (e.g. foreign language teachers who should be required to be at least AL) and if even highly select colleges often do not manage to graduate foreign language majors at this level even with a study abroad period, additional pre-service and in-service language training appears to be necessary in many such cases.

Tschirner (2007) shows that it may be possible to design a four-week intensive immersion program in the country where the target language is spoken in such a way that highly motivated learners at the IM, IH, and AL levels may move up the oral proficiency scale by one

2 The levels are: NL – Novice Low, NM – Novice Mid, NH – Novice High, IL – Intermediate Low, IM – Intermediate Mid, IH – Intermediate High, AL – Advanced Low, AM – Advanced Mid, AH – Advanced High, S – Superior.

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sublevel. The study suggests that there are at least five components that may be necessary for such programs to succeed: knowledge of the development of oral proficiency on the part of teachers and learners; intensive instruction focusing on the speech acts, text types, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation features required at the desired level; tasks and projects to considerably increase speaking and interaction opportunities with many different native speakers; homestays with hosts and/or tandem partners to provide large amounts of additional out-of-class speaking and interaction opportunities; and highly motivated learners.

Tschirner himself designed and co-designed several tests assessing L2 proficiency. One of them is the Hochschulsprachtest of the University of Leipzig Language Centre (<<http://www.uni-leipzig.de/hochschulsprachtest/>>). It offers a modular, web-based system to test individual proficiency in reading, listening, writing and speaking and vocabulary for five languages (English, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Russian). The tests have been developed in accordance with the most recent advances in test research and following the guidelines of the Common European Framework.

Together with Olaf Bärenfänger, Tschirner developed the Cornelsen GER³ Placement Tests, which help to evaluate learners' level of language abilities and to choose an appropriate language course (<http://sprachtest.cornelsen.de/html/en_startseite.html>). He is also one of the directors and producers of two videos designed to help the instruction of OPI testers (*Oral Proficiency Interviews: Zehn Prüfungsgespräche zur Bestimmung mündlicher Handlungsfähigkeit von Deutschlernern*, 2002, and *The German OPI: A Video Introduction*, 1999).

In addition, he served on the committee to revise the ACTFL Reading and Listening Guidelines and co-authored the ACTFL Reading and Listening Tests for Professionals in several languages.

Language education policy

Tschirner's recent efforts in the area of language policy result from his decades-long endeavour to contribute to the optimization of educational processes, both through rigorous research and through organisational and coordination activities. Language education policy is often described as a long-term sustained and conscious effort to alter a language or change a language's functions in a society for the purpose of solving communication problems, also across borders and internationally (cf. Bärenfänger – Tschirner, 2008).

A prominent example of a successful European language (education) policy is the development of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning, Teaching, and Assessment* (CEFR, Council of Europe, 2001; cf. Baker, 2002; Little, 2003; Morrow, 2004). The CEFR has changed how foreign languages are taught, learned, and evaluated in Europe in a substantial way and is considered to be "one of the most important documents in the fields of language learning and teaching in Europe" (Schmenk, 2004, p. 9). Similar efforts on the American continent are the Proficiency Guidelines, the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), and the Writing Proficiency Test (WPT) of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), a U.S. organization dedicated to the improvement and expansion of the teaching and learning of all languages at all levels of instruction throughout the U.S.

3 GER, Gemeinsamer Europäischer Referenzrahmen, is the German translation of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

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While the CEFR was developed to serve the language policy goals of Europe, it may be applied to language learning contexts outside of Europe as well. Van Houten (2005) describes pilot programs using the CEFR in Canada, Japan, and South America. In the United States, there is increasing interest in the CEFR, too, as can be gathered from sessions at major U.S. foreign language conferences such as the 2006 annual meeting of the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (NECTFL) (“Adapting the Common European Framework of Reference to the Americans”) and the 2007 annual conference of ACTFL (“Bridging U.S. and European Assessment Principles”). Tschorner is one of the leading figures actively promoting the alignment of the two systems. In 2010, he initiated and organized the 1st ACTFL CEFR Alignment Conference in Leipzig, which brought together about 40 persons prominent in the field from both Europe and North America to explore a crosswalk between the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and the CEFR and to establish and explore correspondences on theoretical and empirical grounds. The goals of the conference were to present and discuss empirical and theoretical studies on the validity and reliability of tests based on either framework and to develop guidelines for developing tests that can be rated according to both scales etc. Tschorner believes that there is a potential to achieve convergence between the two systems, which would significantly facilitate mobility among levels and institutions as well as among nations between the two continents and worldwide.

Tschirner has published several articles and presented a number of papers analyzing the two frameworks (e.g. Tschirner, 2005; 2008) and establishing correspondences and connections between them (one of them is published in English in the present issue). He shows that the CEFR offers a variety of innovative solutions for language education policy questions, in both European and non-European contexts, because it offers a more comprehensive and detailed system of level descriptions than most other systems. At the same time, he argues that CEFR-based research and development should take note of the research associated with the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, in particular the research associated with the ACTFL OPI, because the North American system has the distinct advantage that it is much better suited for testing and research purposes because it has a clear construct and a thorough quality assurance management system across languages, whereas the CEFR has not been able to show that the levels assigned by different European test providers in different languages are indeed compatible with each other, in other words, the CEFR still grapples with the problem that a B1 in Spanish, for example, is not the same as a B1 in German or a B1 in English.

Tschirner (Bärenfänger – Tschirner, 2008) has also made suggestions how the CEFR may be used as a point of departure for a quality management system and considers the system well suited to initiate a worldwide discussion about quality management in foreign language teaching and learning. According to Tschirner, the CEFR competence descriptors allow for the formulation of quality requirements for the *product* of foreign language competence. This can be seen as a form of quality planning, whereas the competence descriptors themselves may be considered criteria for quality control. Tschirner acknowledges that there are other proficiency descriptors, perhaps even better suited for quality assurance, such as the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines*, and that the use of the CEFR descriptors is somewhat limited because they describe only the product of teaching and learning and not its processes. Nonetheless, he is convinced that transferring techniques such as quality management from the work and organization sciences to the field of foreign language learning will improve the quality

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of foreign language teaching and learning and the documentation of its results, although it certainly will require additional effort and also some getting used to.

Conclusion

As has become obvious from the previous paragraphs, Erwin Tschirner is a prominent contemporary applied linguist who has contributed significantly to several areas of second language research and teaching.

For him, the traditional focus on explicit grammar teaching has been one of the central problems of language instruction. In his view, it is the implicit grammar acquisition from language input that promotes progress in foreign language acquisition. His overall empirical approach to language and language acquisition then naturally emerges from this basic assumption and leads his interest towards data-driven linguistic fields. His contribution to corpus linguistics and computer-assisted language learning/teaching is characterised by a rigorous examination of the relevant theoretical issues in combination with the design and development of materials for language teaching.

A similar approach also characterises his activity in the area of test research and language education policy. He may be credited with important contributions to the assessment of oral proficiency as well as with initiating international efforts towards the alignment of existing language testing frameworks, especially the European CEFR and the American ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines.

In his work, Tschirner deals with a broad spectrum of topics, approaching them with a critical mind and an inspirational perspective. Especially noteworthy is his innovative spirit and organisational talent, which enables him to initiate and coordinate activities across disciplinary fields and national borders.

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