II. Using *Puntos de partida* to Organize Courses for Language Proficiency

A. THE CONCEPT OF PROFICIENCY

Teaching for proficiency has been a goal of United States government and military language schools for over three decades, and many foreign language professionals in academia have also accepted it enthusiastically as a goal for their own classes. The emphasis on proficiency began largely in response to the findings of the 1979 President's Council on Foreign Languages and International Studies and as the result of the "Common Yardstick" project* and the profession's own growing concerns about foreign language instruction. Proficiency-based standards (as opposed to seat-time requirements) for university graduation and teacher certification continue to gain nationwide attention.

The reactions of the profession, both positive and negative, in professional journals and conferences testify to the interest and lively discussion that this concept has created. Although much of the discussion has centered on *oral* proficiency, the idea of proficiency is not, of course, limited to oral production. It also applies to reading, writing, and listening. Teams of professors working under American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) coordination have written generic guidelines for all skills, and language-specific guidelines are available for the most commonly taught languages.[†]

B. TEACHING FOR PROFICIENCY: CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS OF THE CONCEPT OF PROFICIENCY

There are several ways to make the standard beginning language class more proficiency-oriented. The suggestions that follow are based on the ACTFL Intermediate-level descriptors. No claim is made here that they offer a secret key that will magically unlock the doors to language proficiency, but when used with a textbook such as *Puntos de partida*, which was developed with these concerns in mind, they can produce excellent results, even with the customary limitations imposed by time and the often excessive number of students in beginning language classes.

1. The ACTFL Intermediate Level

Creating with the language is an important criterion for the Intermediate level, so ways must be found to stimulate original language production. Personalization, contextualization, input-based and open-ended activities, small-group and/or pair work, and opportunities for correction-free self-expression are the keys to progress in this area, as is practice with critical language functions.

A. PERSONALIZATION

Students will learn Spanish more enthusiastically and produce it more spontaneously if they are encouraged from the beginning to speak and write about themselves, their families, their friends, their

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*This was a multinational effort aimed at developing a set of descriptors of language ability that led to the ACTFL/ETS oral proficiency scale in use today.

[†]ACTFL's website: http://www.actfl.org. ACTFL's Guidelines can also be found on several websites, such as http://www.sil.org/lingualinks/LANGUAGELEARNING/OtherResources/ACTFLProficiencyGuidelines/ACTFLProficiencyGuidelines.htm.

classes, and their favorite activities. Questions and topics that appeal to them will encourage more use of Spanish than will those about which they have no interest or knowledge.

Puntos de partida gives students extensive opportunities to talk about things of greatest interest to them: their families, homes, school and work experiences, favorite sports, activities, and celebrities, plans for the future, and so on. There are many contextualized activities that call on students to answer questions, complete sentences, interview one another, or talk spontaneously about their tastes and preferences.

B. CONTEXTUALIZATION

Exercises consisting of a series of unrelated questions, fill-in-the-blank statements, and the like are much less effective in stimulating language production than are the interesting, contextualized activities of the sort found in *Puntos de partida.*

Even language use of the simplest kind takes on more meaning when placed in a thematic framework suggestive of a real-life situation. *Puntos de partida* is filled with such activities. Here is an example of part of a contextualized activity based on the daily routine of Diego and Antonio, friends that students get to know throughout the activities in *Puntos de partida.* The activity is on page 355 and focuses on the use of **se** for unplanned events.

Un día fatal

¡A Diego y a Antonio todo les salió horrible hoy!
A Diego *se le cayó* la taza de café.
También *se le perdió* la cartera.
A Antonio *se le olvidaron* sus libros y su trabajo cuando fue a clase.
También *se le perdieron* las llaves de su apartamento.

C. INPUT-BASED ACTIVITIES

Second-language acquisition research has recently focused considerable attention on the importance of the development of receptive skills in the broader language learning process. This means not only working on listening and reading skill development, as many good instructors have always done, but more importantly, providing opportunities for students to be exposed to new materials via input-based activities.

The **Vocabulario: Preparación** sections of *Puntos de partida* have traditionally provided such activities. An important feature of the Seventh Edition is the inclusion of input activities in the grammar sections as well. For example, the first student text activity in the **Práctica** section on **-ar** verbs (p. 41) permits students to "process" a variety of **-ar** present tense forms in a meaningful context.

> **Paso 1.** Read the following statements and tell whether they are true for you and your classmates and for your classroom environment. If any statement is not true for you or your class, make it negative or change it in another way to make it correct.
>
> MODELO: **Toco el piano. → Sí, toco el piano. (No, no toco el piano. Toco la guitarra.)**

1. **Necesito dinero.**
2. **Trabajo en la biblioteca.**

and so on. **Paso 2** of the same activity provides an opportunity for students to work with the new structure in pairs, using the same sentences that they have become familiar with in **Paso 1**.

D. OPEN-ENDED ACTIVITIES

Exercises and activities in any given part of a text should progress from the more controlled, in which students are expected to supply the correct answer to demonstrate understanding of a concept or mastery of vocabulary, to the open-ended, in which they are encouraged to be inventive and communicate their own ideas. *Puntos de partida* is rich in such open-ended activities, as can be seen in this one from page 197 in the student text.

¡Qué talento!

Paso 1. Invente oraciones sobre tres cosas que Ud. sabe hacer.

> MODELO: **Sé tocar el acordeón.**

Paso 2. Ahora, en grupos de tres estudiantes, pregúnteles a sus compañeros si saben hacer esas actividades. Escriba sí o no, según sus respuestas.

> MODELO: **¿Sabes tocar el acordeón?**

No judgment of right or wrong should inhibit language use in these activities, for students must feel free to use Spanish as a natural means of communicating personal thoughts and feelings. For the most part, error correction should be done at a later time, as discussed in letter F.

E. SMALL-GROUP AND PAIR WORK

The difficulty of working on such open-ended activities in the large classes normally found in colleges and universities can be dealt with successfully by dividing students into pairs or small groups. These can be for reading, writing, conversational, or cultural-research assignments, or for a combination of skills. It is helpful to match talented students with those of less advanced language ability so that no team is likely to become the class "star." (This also has the effect of allowing slower learners to receive help from more proficient language students in a nonthreatening situation.) Specific tasks should be assigned and time limits established for each activity. The instructor should "float" from one group to another providing assistance or encouragement as needed, ensuring that Spanish is being used, and making mental (or discreetly written) notes of common errors to be worked on later. Each group or pair must know that some, if not all, of them will be required at the end to share with the class what they have been doing during the activity. If all are called on with equal regularity, it will not matter if any given pair or group is not selected to "report" at the end of a specific activity. A friendly, cooperative, noncompetitive environment must be established in the classroom so that students will want to work together toward proficiency.

F. ERROR CORRECTION

Also critical to developing proficiency is judicious error correction. In real-life situations, errors are allowed to pass uncorrected unless they interfere with communication, at which time conversation usually breaks down. In the classroom the same thing must be allowed to happen, difficult though it may be for the instructor to allow. A good technique is for the instructor to take note of frequently made errors as unobtrusively as possible when they occur (in general class discussions or in small-group work) and bring them up after the open-ended activity session is over. Then additional practice can focus on eliminating the more troublesome problems. Only if errors interfere with communication or threaten to be repeated so frequently as to become ingrained should a "free expression" activity be interrupted for correction.

G. LANGUAGE FUNCTIONS

Other functions essential to reaching the Intermediate level of proficiency are the ability *to ask and answer* questions and *to survive predictable situations*. Throughout *Puntos de partida* students are given the opportunity to interview each other or to ask questions in the context of communicative activities. Many role-play situations are also suggested—some rather structured, others quite open-ended. Again, instructors can be as creative as they like in providing opportunities for students to practice these critical functions.

Instructors with a proficiency orientation will want to note in addition the following functional features of the Seventh Edition of *Puntos de partida*.

- The presentation of some material traditionally presented as grammar in the **Nota comunicativa** boxes. For example, the **acabar** + **de** + infinitive structure is presented in such a box (p. 201), in the context of a discussion of actions associated with food and mealtimes.
- The emphasis on language functions in grammar section headings, so that students focus on the function they will be learning to perform rather than exclusively on structure.
- The **Videoteca** section of the **Perspectivas culturales** pages features the new **Entre amigos** video segments. These segments were specifically created to expose students to more natural speech than is traditionally found in first-year video programs. In order to facilitate comprehension, there are two portions to the segment. In the first, students watch one-on-one interviews with the four college students in a controlled environment. This prepares students for the the second portion, in which students watch a more spontaneous conversation on the same topic. These topics are directly related to the chapter theme and reflect real-life, practical situations.

The goal of all such dialogues and activities is to create the illusion of "real-life" human interaction and to allow students to express their own experiences, opinions, and feelings in Spanish. Such exercises and activities provide an ideal opportunity for small-group or pair practice, and they are often identified as such. In addition, the Instructor's Manual suggests further ways to expand and personalize activities. Instructors are encouraged to allow spontaneous class discussion and conversations in Spanish to develop out of the information revealed by students as they enjoy the activities in the text.

2. Reducing the First-Year Grammar Load

One frequent response to suggestions like those in the preceding section is, "I'd like to be able to take the time for such activities in my class, but if I do, we'll never finish the book." This is certainly a problem in multiple-section courses in which all students must arrive at the same point by the end of each term, and it is a problem that has often been exacerbated by the philosophy of textbook writers and departmental administrators alike. It is usual for foreign language textbooks to pack a standard canon of grammar into a first-year book, and department heads routinely expect instructors to cover every bit of it in a year. The frustrations that result for both instructors and students are obvious.

There are some very solid reasons for *reducing the amount of grammar presented in beginning courses.* First, it is clearly more likely that students will master the fundamentals of Spanish if they are given time to use vocabulary and structures repeatedly in a variety of contexts. Proficiency in Spanish is not attained merely by knowing about Spanish but by using Spanish as much as possible. Concepts and vocabulary must become second nature to the language learner, and this is not achieved by memorization alone. It is far more effective to reduce the quantity of structures studied and fully master those that *are* taught than to pack the course so heavily with grammar that students spend all their time memorizing new rules and have no time to practice using them.

Second, setting the ACTFL Intermediate level as a reasonable goal for first-year students of Spanish suggests that the most important grammar structures for a first-year course are those necessary to achieve proficiency at that level. This means that the structures that enable students to express their own feelings in a personal way, talk about their own lives, survive basic, predictable situations, ask and answer questions, and in general sustain a good conversation are those that should receive the greatest

emphasis in a first-year text. This is not to say that structures such as the imperfect subjunctive and the conditional should never be taught in a first-year course; it merely implies that teachers should not set unreasonable goals for their students. Successful mastery of the preterite and imperfect or of the subjunctive on an achievement test does not necessarily translate into proficiency at advanced levels, where those structures are essential.

Puntos de partida has taken these factors into account. It places greatest emphasis on those structures essential to achieving proficiency at the Intermediate level. Here are some examples. Concepts such as the past perfect indicative are downplayed, introduced lexically (p. 453 of the student text), and practiced only briefly. Passive **se** constructions are presented for recognition only. Material such as the past subjunctive, *if* clauses, and future verb and conditional verb forms are all presented in later chapters (although parts of these paradigms are presented functionally relatively early in the text, for example, **me gustaría** + infinitive).

Consequently, students work with these secondary structures (secondary for the needs of beginning students), but not as much as with other, more fundamental material. Exposure to the structures, however, means that students have an awareness of them, with in-depth study postponed to the second year. In all probability they will master such material more quickly when the appropriate time comes, and the first year can be devoted to practice with and review of more basic material, where proficiency can more realistically be achieved.

3. Authentic Materials

Realia and authentic texts of all kinds enhance students' receptive skills, reinforce vocabulary, contextualize grammar, provide a basis for real-life conversations, and contribute to cultural understanding. Without authentic materials, a language text is sterile. With them, learning a language can be an enjoyable, enriching, practical experience. Thus, authentic materials have always formed an integral part of *Puntos de partida*.

4. Ancillary Materials

The package of materials that accompanies *Puntos de partida* provides enormous support to both students and instructors interested in proficiency building. The effectiveness of *Puntos* will be greatly enhanced by adding or working with any of the components of that package. (See the Preface to the main student text for a complete list of the materials that are available.)

C. CONCLUSION

Puntos de partida is up to date in its approach to teaching Spanish and can be used effectively in proficiency-oriented classrooms. To derive the maximum benefits from the materials, instructors are urged to do the following:

- Encourage personalized, open-ended conversation with the class as a whole and with students working in pairs or small groups, and spontaneously, as suggested by thematic vocabulary, realia, and readings.
- Capitalize on the thematic vocabulary sections to enhance students' word power in Spanish.
- Take full advantage of integrated realia and authentic texts, so that students can learn to read Spanish meaningfully.
- Regularly use the student ancillaries and the abundant support materials available to the instructor.
- Above all, ensure that grades are calculated in such a way as to reflect the communication skills students are practicing, in equal proportion to the time spent on them in class.

This approach to teaching for proficiency should make learning Spanish both more enjoyable to students and more functionally productive. The ACTFL Intermediate level is a reasonable goal for first-year college students to achieve, and it is not too much to expect that most students in a class will reach that level in most skills. *Puntos de partida* provides a framework and an extensive series of communicative activities designed to lead to that level of proficiency. When sufficient time, encouragement, and help are provided, students can achieve the highest level of proficiency possible in one year and establish a solid foundation on which further proficiency can be built.

While believing that their text serves well as a vehicle for proficiency-oriented classes, the authors of *Puntos de partida* feel that no textbook can promise that students will achieve the proficiency goals set by a language department, by ACTFL, or by any other organization. It remains the individual instructor's task to carefully and consistently implement and supplement in the classroom the proficiency-oriented activities found in the text. It is the authors' hope that the text will be used as they intended: to help students develop proficiency in the four language skills essential to truly communicative language learning and to learn about Hispanic culture within the United States and abroad.