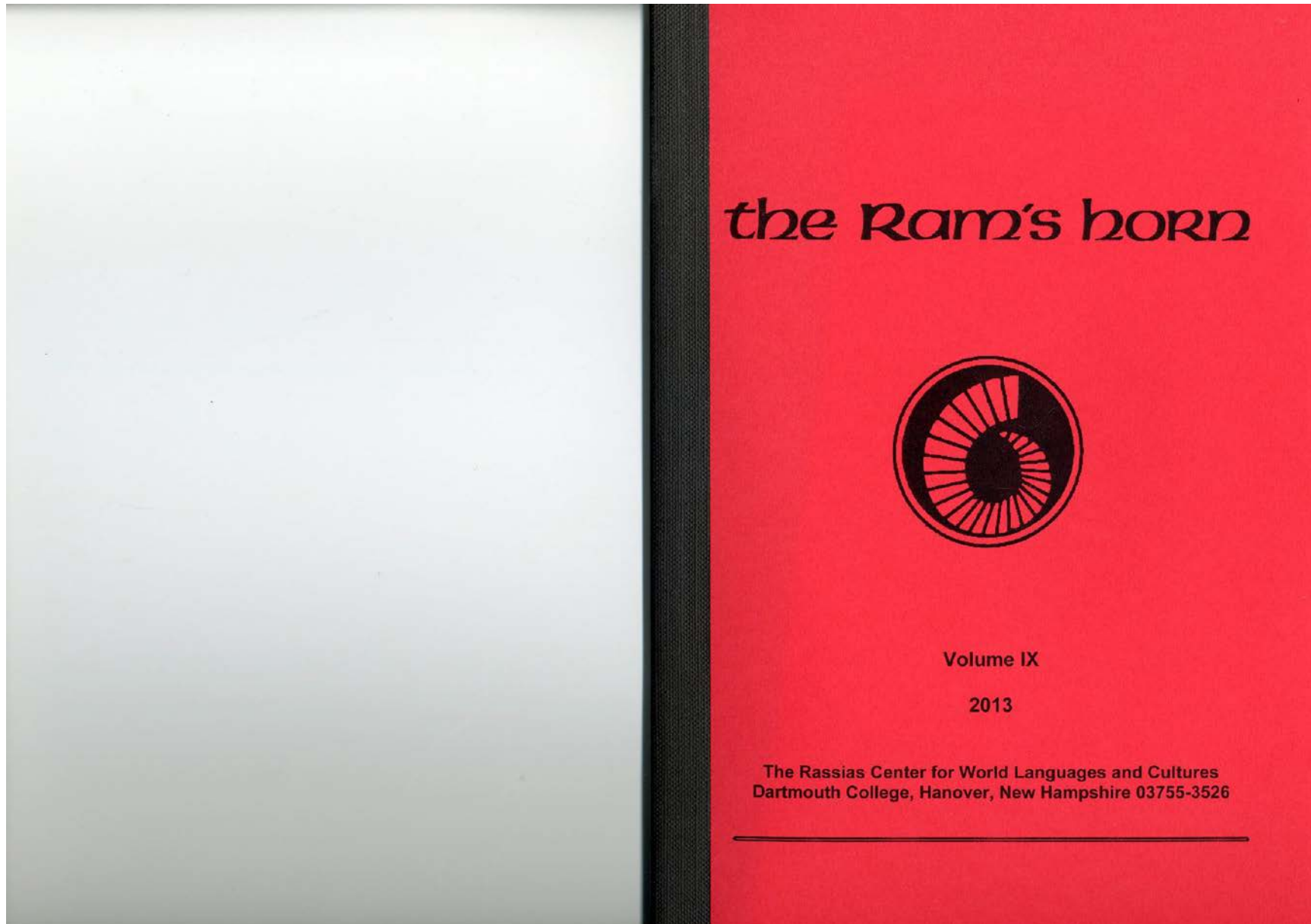


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stuff and to stand beside, behind John as a privileged witness. Rather than hide the defect, he thrusts the short pants leg out in front of his audience (as I suppose he would have the hole in his original pants, contriving a different lesson from *that*). The convention of two legs equal betrays, he says with a wave of the pants leg, both Nature and Humanity, in assuming a sameness within us and among us that we take clumsily for *equality* (the pants leg again). It is, he goes on, what's *not* the same that's most human in us, in the most human of us and that we need celebrate (pants leg). That difference, claims John, is our heritage from the Tower of Babel and what's given us the joy of this present communion. Without the difference (pants leg), we'd live in numbing sameness, enjoy no alternate visions of this world, never exercise our wits against the puzzle of diverse speech (pants leg).

This homily delivered, he goes on about the day's business, hammering away at the theme of glorious diversity (not to say diversion). The teachers, who've begun to assimilate both the message and its rhythm, follow rapt and throw themselves into the dramatic exercises, into the action John demands of all his students (and colleagues). But it's during the breaks that I fancy I see the depth of his influence. Among the teachers milling in small groups, sipping their coffee and noshing on some kind of horrifying granular local pastry, I catch out of the corner of an eye a hoisted trouser leg, a rotating exposed ankle, and fancy I hear over and again "puksid," "puksisi ules kaarim," snippets of conversation I transcribe as I imagine I heard them and which I have caused since then to be translated for me: "trousers," "cuff up trousers." The gladiator, Romans insisted, "*in harena capit consilium*": "... in the arena makes his plan." I'm willing to believe that, for I've seen it, though I have every reason to believe that trousers, hemmed or otherwise, may not have been an issue for the gladiator.

From a woman I'd have taken for a tractor mechanic, John drew tears as we took our leave. From a lumbering bear of a man, a hug of fraternal gratitude. From the Director of the place, what he had to give: his whole heart and the official academy necktie (I still have mine). Testimony to the efficacy of The Method™ you'll find amply in this journal and others; we have documentation of John's effect on *students*. His galvanization of *these* magnificent, enduring spirits in a place once devoid of Soul, now struggling to retrieve Humanity and who draw from John the inspiration to pursue and persist both in their calling and in their awakening to long-dormant identities, this I find, starchy old soldier little given to maudlin reflection, ... well, just plain ol' vanilla *glorious*. A magical moment, one rare enough these days, but one we can reconstruct for ourselves each time we apply John's lessons—and his spirit—in our classes among our own.

## Ten Years of Speaking to Learn: The Assistant Teacher Program at Fairfield University

by  
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### Introduction.

Language educators from Fairfield University discovered during a 1997 summer seminar that a remarkable but half-expected discrepancy existed between their students' reading or writing ability and their speaking ability. Speaking ability was lagging, often by at least a year at the college level. The solution was to start an Assistant Teacher/Oral Practice Session (AT/OPS) program adapted from the Dartmouth Intensive Language Model/Rassias Method described by John Rassias in his seminal Peace Corps paper (1970). The present article summarizes the creation of the Fairfield program and research on student attitudes, achievements and related results for over 3,000 students in Arabic, Brazilian Portuguese, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish over the decade following its introduction in the Spring of 1998.

Using the initial guidelines that had just been published in 1996 by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL),<sup>1</sup> Fairfield University's recently hired director of the Culpeper Language Resource Center (LARC), a full-time faculty member, obtained an internal grant that provided for both faculty stipends and two outside consultants. The need for the five-day seminar/workshop had followed on the heels of departmental discussions of oral proficiency principles and live demonstrations of well-known AT techniques during the 1996-97 academic year. Furthermore, John Rassias had just visited the University and conducted his first of several teacher workshops that would follow over the next decade, infusing vim and vigor in the participating faculty and enabling them to practice many of the teaching techniques used in the Method.

The languages represented at our proficiency seminar/workshop included French, German, Italian, Russian and Spanish. Professor John Rassias's oft-repeated maxim that we must speak in order to learn to speak was taken to heart since faculty recognized that language analysis by itself was insufficient to this end. A written survey administered to students of Intermediate French over several Fall semesters by the seminar director had also indicated that for at least 80% of them, the top priority in taking the course—apart from satisfaction of the language requirement—was to improve their speaking ability.

### **I. Rationale for Starting an Assistant Teacher Program.**

In the instructors' view, non-heritage (or traditional) students of Spanish and French finishing upper-intermediate courses were at best capable of oral performance at the Novice-High level. This consensus meant that after two to four years of high school language study supplemented by a year at the college level, students were usually speaking in multiple words and only occasionally in full sentences or question forms unless these phrases had been memorized. Students could understand and communicate in a majority of survival-oriented categories such as family, food, weather, numbers, clothing, colors, time, politeness expressions, travel, and work/school, but mainly in the present tense, and only sporadically in the past tense or combined with other information such as negative expressions and object pronouns. They were not Intermediates by national standards. The challenges for faculty included: 1) developing classroom practices for more communicative instruction that would give students more opportunities to practice speaking; 2) adopting textbook packages that also offered appropriate audio and video materials and that embedded such practices (dialogues, pre-communicative drills leading up to full-fledged transactional activities, and role-playing activities); 3) a common rubric for measuring student progress in speaking.

### **II. Implementation of the AT Program.**

The director organized a three-day workshop to train ATs, similar to Dartmouth College's AT workshop structure.<sup>2</sup> Although the initial experiment involved French only, colleagues in Japanese, Italian and Russian asked that prospective ATs in their languages also be allowed to attend. Thirteen instructors in all from French, German, Italian, Japanese, Russian and Spanish participated in the initial Assistant Teacher/Oral Practice Session (AT/OPS) workshop. Seven AT candidates participated. Six ATs were ultimately hired from this group. While several language programs experimented with ATs, we methodically integrated our four French ATs into the two Core levels: Basic (first-year) and Intermediate, each lasting two semesters. While Basic French consisted of a small group of about a dozen students, approximately ninety students were enrolled in the Intermediate course, in four sections, within a total departmental multi-language enrollment of 1,034 in an undergraduate population of approximately 3,200 full-time students.

Volunteers from French classes were individually tracked in the first oral practice sessions. We concluded that good attendance at OPS may have saved some low-scoring students from failing the second semester of Basic French, but the higher-scoring students did well in every class component, earning between B+ and A in the course. It is possible that the Basic-level students could have benefitted even more noticeably from attending more than one OPS per week, but

they were already meeting with the Master Teacher (instructor) for four hours per week rather than the standard three.

While we perceived that oral proficiency had increased across the board in Basic French, the more impressive results came at the Intermediate course level, where a heterogeneous group of students, mainly Freshmen, finishes the University's intermediate-level requirement. The traditionally small size of our Basic French section had allowed a greater degree of communicative practice, we assumed. However, most Intermediate classes had between 18 and 25 students, and this size difference had created significant challenges for the instructors. The classes normally met only three times per week for 50 minutes each. OPS offered a structural solution that afforded small group practice with instant feedback from a peer: an AT who had successfully auditioned for the AT/OPS program. We found it important to keep the OPS class size reasonably small, generally with four to eight students but occasionally reaching up to ten or eleven because of challenges in scheduling and classroom logistics. Exceeding eight students resulted in less thorough practice in part because ATs, while adhering to the randomized selection protocol, experienced difficulty in recalling who had already answered. Occasionally, a few students were thus inadvertently omitted from practicing some items individually but ultimately did practice them with the group thanks to the choral repetition component of each exercise.

The twelve Intermediate French students that we individually followed came from a variety of academic backgrounds and had Freshman, Sophomore or Junior standing. All of them who attended at least six of the twelve OPS sessions and passed the final written exam that semester scored at the Novice-High or Intermediate-Low level on our oral proficiency test. Previously, even students in our advanced Intermediate-level course had at best attained the Novice-High level, by faculty estimations during our proficiency workshop. We should note, however, that some language faculty members were also learning new techniques under the Rassias Method and using them in class. We were convinced that the OPS were helping our Intermediate students speak more proficiently, and we were pleased that their fourth language meeting per week was being done at relatively low financial cost to the institution.

In order to better understand our AT/OPS program's impact, the program director created surveys that faculty with OPS collected from their students during regular class time at the end of each semester, allowing them to review their class' results before the packet was submitted to him. Furthermore, copies of another survey concerning the ATs' opinions were collected by the director from the ATs during the final administrative meeting of the year.

Following the Spring 1998 semester, faculty opinions and survey-based results convinced us to broaden the AT/OPS Program's implementation. Over two-thirds of the participating students thought that the program had helped them. Oral Practice Sessions were then scheduled for Basic German and Italian. In



subsequent semesters we were able to add Intermediate German and occasionally, Intermediate Italian OPS. The decision to add these languages was based on AT, faculty and classroom availability. As described below, we found that implementing even just one fifty-minute OPS per week per student substantially raised Intermediate French students' oral proficiency level by the end of the year, from a Novice level to an Intermediate one for most students.<sup>3</sup> This result was common in the other Group 1 languages—such as Italian and Spanish—as classified by the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) of the U.S. Government (Hadley 26). Although additional progress might have been made with more OPS per student, issues of costs and logistics prevented this option. Instead, we increased the number of OPS per week where possible in order to reduce class size to between four and eight students.

Since no OPS exercise materials were available for any of the textbooks then in use at Fairfield University, the director met with faculty to explain certain model structures they could follow so that workshop and curricular materials would be ready by Fall 1998. In the case of French, drill cards from John Rassias' and Jacqueline Skubly's *Le Français: Départ-Arrivée* had been used in Spring 1998. Although this textbook was not yet in use at Fairfield, we adapted some of the drills or wrote new materials similar to these for the textbooks in use. Stipends were secured to compensate faculty for editing existing materials or writing new exercises.

### III. Ten years later.

Advancing ten years after the initial implementation of the OPS, approximately 3,300 student surveys had been collected. Of these, the results of up to 3,190 surveys were available for analysis here. The final question on the student OPS survey asked for qualitative comments that, although not numerically rated, provided us with information that we could analyze according to whether they were positive or negative. The surveys were kept anonymous to encourage students to report their impressions freely. To ground students' responses, the questions placed an emphasis on how the OPS had affected their grades, the "bottom line" for most students.

### IV. Results.

In the full set of results, approximately two-thirds of the students responding indicated that the OPS had helped them improve their grades in pronunciation, speaking and listening. These were the primary areas of interest in our creating the program. In two research areas of incidental interest, we found that a quarter of the students indicated an improvement in grades related to grammar topics, and almost a third indicated that their vocabulary grades had improved. While only four percent of students indicated that the OPS had led to

better grades on writing assignments, no positive correlation on this aspect had been expected. Still, that percentage amounted to a total of 120 students.

Overall, the students agreed that their motivation to learn a language—as well as their confidence in learning it—increased as a result of the OPS. Even more encouragingly, they agreed or strongly agreed that their ATs exhibited good teaching, possessed a mastery of techniques, were energetic, and had a very good attitude.

Freely offered comments on the surveys were evenly divided between positive and negative. We were gratified to see comments such as, "The instructor was easy to understand and made OPS a fun class to attend," "OPS is very effective," "OPS is a great asset" or "It's a fantastic program" (from Spring 2006). Because students do not receive college credit for attendance at Fairfield University's OPS, which are often taught by undergraduate students, we were not surprised to see comments where students asked for credit. They also suggested that instructors make explicit connections between the OPS and graded assignments as well as find ways to personalize the activities in the OPS as oral abilities grow. To help the ATs with such work, the director taught the ATs an additional RM technique (The Wave—an episodic and cumulative performance) and created a list of over 160 personalized but relatively generic questions based on oral proficiency topics that both instructors and ATs could use in class. These lists also served as useful review documents for the students.

The faculty reported that OPS students' oral proficiency level had gone up. Although most instructors conducted only short oral exams of three to ten minutes at the end of the semester, the director administered OPI-like exams or "prochievement" exams combining ACTFL's OPI protocols with course-specific content that lasted about twenty minutes. These were given to all of his Intermediate French students. Estimates indicate that approximately 90% of students scored at the Intermediate-Low level or above at the end of the two-semester sequence. Data from Spring 2005 and 2006 reveal that about half of these Intermediate-level results were at the Intermediate-Mid or Intermediate-High levels described by ACTFL (Hadley 473-4). Typical of the many students earning B's and A's were the abilities to accomplish the following tasks, at least singly and sometimes in combination: 1) speak consistently in full sentences about all or nearly all designated survival- and limited work-oriented topics; 2) use multiple consecutive sentences; 3) use negations; 4) ask questions; 5) role-play in transactions; 6) narrate in the past, present and near future, occasionally in the simple future, and; 7) use single replacement pronouns and occasional, memorized double-object pronouns such as "*je me les suis lavées*" or "*je ne me les suis pas lavées*" when talking about whether they had brushed their teeth that morning. No more than 10 percent of these Intermediate-course students scored below the Intermediate level, with almost all of this lower group scoring at the Novice-High level, rarely below.

One of the major benefits of the Rassias Method in the second year of college language instruction—even with just one fifty-minute OPS or “drill” per week per student—thus seems to be an improvement in students’ oral ability, including for students earning C’s or D’s. The OPS help assure a democratization of the playing field, so to speak—that the weaker students finally “get onto the radar screen” with oral skills they can use in conversation and to transact personal business. And based on our tracking of some first-year language students, final oral proficiency results in the FSI Group 1 languages reach Novice High instead of Novice Mid when work in the OPS is combined with communicatively oriented teaching by the instructor for a total of approximately 120 hours.<sup>4</sup> The highest-achieving students in these Basic courses, roughly 10 percent, reach the Intermediate-Low level after one academic year. Additional OPS meetings, especially for the more challenging languages (Groups 2, 3 and 4—Arabic, Chinese, etc.), would be especially advantageous.

Just how much the students can progress in a nearly ideal Master Teacher/Assistant Teacher structure has been noted by this author in *Breakthrough: Essays and Vignettes in Honor of John A. Rassias* (59). Additionally, we should note that the certified ACTFL testers involved in testing volunteers at the end of the Accelerated Language Programs (ALPs) at Dartmouth in 2003 were unknown to their examinees, who were all tested by telephone and thus had no visual cues or feedback. Of the seven tested participants who enrolled in the Rassias Foundation’s ten-day Spanish ALPs immersion program as true beginners, three ultimately scored at the Novice-Mid level, two at the Novice-High level and two at the Intermediate-Low level. These are impressive results for only ten days of study, particularly for non-traditional learners who had not been “students” for years. And these results square with those later observed by Anthony Valdin, Scott Early, Carolyn Augart, G. Dean Gleghorn, and Helene C. R. Miles (263-4), who document other true beginners finishing the 2007 ALPs Spanish program at the Novice-Mid and Novice-High levels.

#### V. Benefits to the AT

One area of the Rassias Method that had, to this author’s knowledge, never been researched, is the benefit of an OPS or drill program to the ATs themselves. While this aspect is, of course, secondary to the language students’ gains, it deserves some attention. To better understand the effects of the OPS, we surveyed the Assistant Teachers on occasion. In all, 144 ATs had taught in Fairfield’s AT/OPS Program at the time of our analysis, and they were distributed among nine languages: Arabic, Brazilian Portuguese, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Russian and Spanish. We collected a total of 36 surveys: at the end of the academic year for the first two complete years of the program—in 1999 and 2000—then again in 2002 and 2006.

ATs indicated that the fourteen- or fifteen-hour workshop had prepared them very well for their work and that they had attended nearly all or all of the workshop hours if they were first-time candidates. Returning ATs indicated that they should be required to attend as much as possible, which benefitted both these “veteran” ATs and the new candidates, who thus had additional role models. The supervisors’ work was judged as very good to excellent, and the materials used by ATs as very good. These items—supervision and appropriate materials—are vital to a successful AT program. We have been fortunate that the University has consistently provided stipends to faculty who create drills and supervise ATs.

The ATs themselves judged both their students’ improvement and supervisors’ feedback as good. They strongly agreed that the OPS helped ATs who were not native speakers of the language maintain their oral mastery in the target language as well as increase their confidence in teaching a language. Furthermore, an AT/OPS program appears to significantly increase ATs’ interest in teaching: nearly half of the surveyed ATs agreed with this result for both foreign language teaching (42%) and teaching in general (47%). Eighty-one percent of the ATs agreed that the OPS encouraged them to engage in a career requiring a foreign language, which is heartening.

Qualitative results further strengthen the positive impression given by the AT survey data. For example, although only one AT in the original group of six in January 1998 was a native speaker of the target language, he and two other ATs of this cohort have since become professional language educators. As of 2001, three former ATs had received Fulbright fellowships. The “AT factor” seems to have sparked a winning combination of mentoring and student talents, especially where students have combined a major or minor in languages and International Studies. As of 2002, thirty-three percent of all Fairfield “Fulbrighters” had been ATs, and 100% of all Fulbright or other government grant recipients since the 1998-99 academic year bound for French- or German-speaking countries had been former ATs.\* In 2002-2003, three of four Fairfield Fulbrighters or government grant recipients in French and German had been ATs. A fourth AT had earned a master’s and was working as an adjunct language faculty member at Fairfield. Our Fulbright program has since diversified its recruiting efforts among other majors and languages, and more Fairfield students have been applying for these fellowships for areas of research in the target language or for English Teaching Assistantships. In 2007, the Fulbright Commission awarded Fairfield the most Fulbrights (5) of any Carnegie IIA (Bachelor’s/Master’s) institution that year. In 2008, that record-setting number for Fairfield jumped to nine Fulbright awards.

#### VI. Conclusion.

Clearly, the implementation of an AT program generates greater energy among both faculty and students. While significant effort must be invested for the program to be successful, the benefits are gained quickly in several vital areas: 1)

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closing the gap between the level of students' written and oral skills by significantly raising oral proficiency; 2) providing faculty with incentives for curricular change; 3) adding communicative teaching techniques to faculty repertoires, and; 4) forming a cadre of energetic in-house assistants who enliven the language, literature and culture departments in which they take courses or otherwise participate.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See [www.actfl.org](http://www.actfl.org) under the Publications tab for the 1999 revised speaking and writing guidelines. The director had participated in a U.S. Department of Education workshop that provided fifty clock hours of training for proficiency testing. He had been teaching since 1983 as a Master Teacher and frequent section Chair of French in the summer Accelerated Language Programs (ALPs) for the Rassias Foundation at Dartmouth College and had originally been a French AT as an undergraduate.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Charles Stansfield and Jeanne Hornor, p. 24, and Winston and Boots, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> See similar situation reported with only two drill sessions per week in Winston and Boots, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> According to the *ETS Oral Proficiency Testing Manual* data provided by Omaggio Hadley (26), a Foreign Service officer with "minimum" or "average" language learning ability taking a Group 1 language such as French, Spanish or Italian at the Foreign Service Institute needs approximately 240 hours of instruction in eight weeks, a very intensive if not immersion setting of 30 hours per week, to reach the Intermediate-Mid proficiency level (FSI "1" rating). No data is available in that table for lower levels.

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[\*Editor's note: Also see Iris Bork-Goldfield's article, "The Rassias Method and the Exchange Student . . .," in the present issue.]