Becoming an Expert in a Foreign Language

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300-word abstract

Globalization raises the bar for foreign language expertise in business, health fields and government. A recent National Research Council report indicates that, while demands continue to arise, national foreign language resources are not sufficient to meet them. To gain insight into effective development of foreign language expertise, we investigated significant language learning success in three distinct populations: diplomats, intelligence analysts, and FBI interpreters. Participants recruited were identified experts in their fields with documented professional-level foreign-language ability. We conducted extensive, individual, semi-structured interviews using a protocol carefully designed to (a) elicit known SLA-facilitation factors (e.g., age, input, and instruction) and (b) probe for other factors (e.g., job requirements or novel participant-identified factors). Interview transcripts were uploaded to Atlas.ti to facilitate systematic analyses within and across groups. Starting from a conceptual map modeling foreign-language expertise development, we built a detailed codebook, established inter-coder reliability, and coded each interview extensively for specific factors within broader expertise-model categories, such as language exposure, interlocutors, language-learning history, career-related language needs, language ability ratings in professional settings, and perceived causes of job-related language difficulties. We then used Atlas.ti query tools to investigate similarities and differences within and across groups, extract frequently occurring success factors, examine relationships among factors, and elaborate the model of the effective foreign-language expertise development. The findings we present reveal the trajectories to language expertise in each group. Across groups, there are intriguing common factors leading to a generally very high level of proficiency. Beyond that, however, professional job requirements determine distinct means to attaining foreign-language expertise, with the interpreters enduring unique pressures leading to the greatest degree of expertise and promoting special skills and abilities that enable them to work effectively in two or more languages. To conclude, we discuss how the research findings are used to improve language expertise training.

50-word abstract

To investigate foreign-language expertise we administered a semi-structured interview to diplomats, intelligence analysts, and FBI interpreters. Atlas.ti analyses revealed common trajectories and specific professional requirements which engender expertise. Interpreters develop the greatest expertise and other special skills. We present an empirical model of foreign-language expertise and draw implications for training.