Chapter **3**

The FOCAL SKILLS Approach: An Assessment

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1. INTRODUCTION

The FOCAL SKILLS (FS) approach is a relatively recent development in language program design. The basic intent of FS is to accelerate the acquisition of intermediate-level language proficiency by maximizing the efficiency of instruction; this is supposed to be accomplished by carefully placing each student in a sequence of skill-focused modules in which comprehensible input and communication are stressed. Since FS is now being used by several intensive English programs, it is both possible and desirable to evaluate the approach empirically.

In Section 2 of this chapter, I explain the key features of the FS approach, contrasting it with the *standard model* (SM, an informal label referring to the program design features that characterize many intensive ESL programs in the United States). In Section 3, I present the results of various studies that compare the learning outcomes of students in FS and SM programs. In the concluding section I discuss these results and their implications.

2. FOCAL SKILLS AND THE STANDARD MODEL

2.1. The Standard Model

Before explaining the FS approach, I will outline the key features of the SM. This will provide a frame of reference with which the distinctive characteristics of FS can be contrasted. It should be understood that the SM is an abstraction, not a detailed description of any particular program.

2.1.1. SM Program Structure

In a typical intensive preuniversity ESL program, students progress through a series of levels (usually about six). Ordinarily, all the levels are structured in much the same way, with balanced amounts of time devoted to listening, reading, writing, speaking, and grammar (Fig. 3.1). Thus, while the work becomes more difficult as the student progresses through the program, its general nature remains fairly constant.

2.1.2. SM Placement

A variety of placement instruments may be used to place incoming students; these may include standardized global proficiency tests such as TOEFL®, in-house test batteries that measure separate skills, and so forth. Continuing students may be placed by the same system as incoming students, by their grades in previous work, or by a combination of these methods. In some SM programs, each student is placed in the same level for all skills; in other programs, *split placements* may be permitted, allowing a student to be placed in different levels for different skills.

Placement can pose dilemmas and paradoxes in a SM program. It is not uncommon for a student to be stronger in one skill than another. For example, a student may have Level 2 listening/speaking ability and Level 4 reading/writing ability. In a program that places students in one level across the board, such a student can be placed in Level 3 as a reasonable compromise; but then some of the work will be too easy and some will be too difficult. If the program uses split placements, the student can be placed in Level 2 listening/speaking and Level 4 reading/writing. However, split placements can lead to very heterogeneous groupings as far as collateral skills are concerned. For example, the Level 4 reading/writing class may have students with listening/speaking abilities ranging over several levels, making oral communication in the classroom rather problematic. Also, students with split placements are likely to finish some parts of

LEVEL 1	LISTENING	SPEAKING	READING	WRITING	GRAMMAR
LEVEL 2	LISTENING	SPEAKING	READING	WRITING	GRAMMAR
LEVEL 3	LISTENING	SPEAKING	READING	WRITING	GRAMMAR
LEVEL 4	LISTENING	SPEAKING	READING	WRITING	GRAMMAR
LEVEL 5	LISTENING	SPEAKING	READING	WRITING	GRAMMAR
LEVEL 6	LISTENING	SPEAKING	READING	WRITING	GRAMMAR

FIG. 3.1. Structure of a standard model intensive ESL program.

the program before other parts, causing scheduling headaches for themselves and their advisors.

2.1.3. SM Pedagogy

Most SM ESL programs in the United States employ an eclectic pedagogy. A general characterization is difficult, but it would probably be fair to say that certain broad features are prevalent. There is a tendency to favor synthetic, interventionist syllabi, in which the language is presented in fragments that are sequenced and controlled by the teacher (Long & Crookes, 1992).[1] Detailed syllabi are often constructed in which each level has its own agenda for each skill, and each skill is subdivided into smaller components. Language components such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation are often taught in discrete units, each accompanied by various types of drills, exercises, and other relatively artificial activities. This general pedagogical orientation calls for specialized instructional materials, which are available from a number of publishers.

2.2. The FOCAL SKILLS Approach

2.2.1. Functional Skill Integration

The basic idea underlying the FS approach is that the macroskills—listening, reading, writing, and speaking—form complex and shifting patterns of functional interrelationships during the course of L2 acquisition, especially when the target language is also the language of instruction (Fig. 3.2). At a given stage of development, a skill may be dependent or autonomous. Dependent skills can be subdivided into focal and emergent skills, and autonomous skills include the categories of foundational and instrumental skills.

A *dependent skill* is one which a language acquirer is not yet able to use with relative ease. Such a skill has great potential for development if sufficient input is provided. An *autonomous skill*, on the other hand, is relatively well developed; it can contribute to the development of other skills, and it will continue to develop without special attention through normal language use.

A focal skill is the focus of intensive efforts to develop it as rapidly as possible. For example, a FS program has a Listening Module in which all of the work is aimed at accelerating the students' progress in listening comprehension.

Instrumental skills can be used as tools when focusing on another skill. For example, listening comprehension is instrumental in the Reading Module of a FS program, because the teacher always conducts class discussions in the target language.

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[1]In this context, *synthetic* means that the student must resynthesize the language out of the fragments provided by instruction.
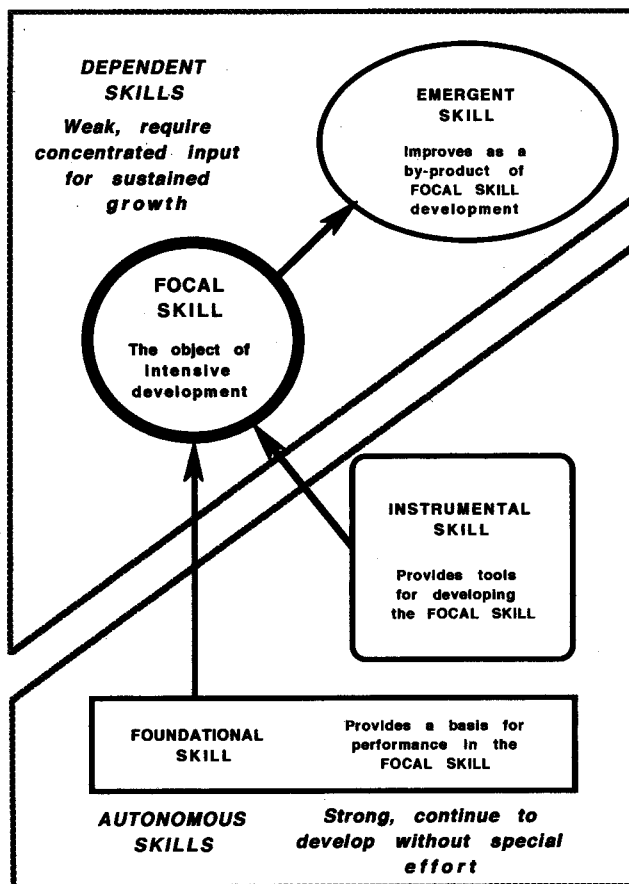
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FIG. 3.2. Functional skill integration.

A foundational skill provides a basis for performance in another skill. For example, reading is foundational for writing, because the elements that a person can appropriately produce in writing will generally be a subset of the elements that the person can recognize and understand when reading.

Emergent skills are those that develop as a consequence of growth in their foundational skills. For example, since listening is foundational for speaking, we expect speaking proficiency to improve if listening comprehension improves.

2.2.2. FS Program Structure

The guiding program design principle of FS is to create a sequence of skill-focused instructional modules configured in such a way as to take the greatest possible advantage of the functional skill relationships. The instructional modules are organized around the FS Proficiency Assessments, an ordered series of skill
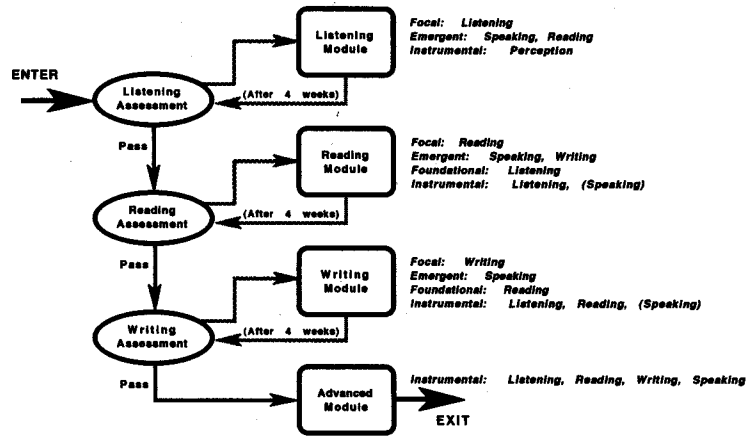
The FOCAL SKILLS Approach

FIG. 3.3. The FOCAL SKILLS program structure.

assessments. The relationships between the modules, the skills, and the assessments are illustrated in Fig. 3.3.

The *Advanced Module* is not actually a FS module because it has no designated focal skill. This module functions as a transitional stage for advanced students, providing whatever additional work they need before leaving the intensive ESL program. The Advanced Module could be set up like an advanced level in a SM program, or it might have any other format; this depends entirely on the needs and circumstances of the program and its students.

It will be noticed that no modules focus on speaking or grammar. The FS approach relies mainly on acquisition rather than direct instruction for these aspects of language (Krashen, 1985, p. 2). One of the Electives (discussed later) may offer grammar instruction for students who request it, and individualized instruction can be provided in the Writing Module to help students learn certain "editing" grammar rules that are not readily acquired (Krashen, 1992, p. 28).

The FS modules meet for only 3 hours a day (75% of the instructional day). The fourth hour is devoted to Elective Courses. These Electives are entirely separate from the regular curriculum. An Elective is anything related to the study of English that a teacher wants to teach and students want to take, from grammar to poetry reading. Students select freely from the currently available offerings; they are allowed to change their Elective at weekly intervals.

2.2.3. FS Placement

The placement system, which consists solely of the Listening, Reading, and Writing Assessments (see Fig. 3.3), is designed to ensure that every student's time will be spent as productively as possible, focusing on skills that particularly

need improvement. It ensures that the students in each module have the appropriate foundational and instrumental skills to accelerate their progress in the focal skill of the module. It allows them to spend as much time as they need in each module and then move on at the end of any 4-week period, as soon as they have reached criterion in the focal skill. It also allows them to skip any module that they do not need. Exactly the same criteria used for placing incoming students are used for placing continuing students: the skill assessments. Teachers do not assign grades or determine which students pass their classes.

New students are first tested for listening comprehension. The Listening Assessment identifies students whose listening proficiency is less than that of the average Level 4 student in a typical six-level SM program. Students who cannot demonstrate this level of listening comprehension must enter the Listening Module; they will have a chance every 4 weeks to pass the test and move on. All students who pass the Listening Assessment, whether on their first or a subsequent try, take the Reading Assessment next. This test requires about a Level 5 reading ability to pass; those who are below this standard take the Reading Module and are retested every 4 weeks. After passing the Reading Assessment, students must take the Writing Assessment, with a passpoint comparable to the ability of a Level 6 student. Any student who has passed all three assessments is placed in the Advanced Module.

The FS placement system may be thought of as a method of determining which skill has the highest acquisition potential at a given point in time for a given student. A skill with high acquisition potential is a good candidate to be a focal skill, since there is likely to be a large return for time spent. High acquisition potential is associated with two factors. First, any foundational and instrumental skills must be well established (the conditions that enable rapid development must be present). Second, the skill itself must be relatively weak (there must be ample room for growth).

This placement system avoids the pitfalls associated with SM programs (2.1.2). An unambiguous, motivated placement is determined for every student, and the question of compromise or split placements does not arise.

2.2.4. FS Pedagogy

Pedagogically as well as structurally, the FS approach differs in important respects from most SM programs. The modules of a FS program are not very much like the levels and classes of a SM program. Both the groupings of students and the curricular objectives of the modules are determined by principles that differ rather sharply from those that govern SM programs. Accordingly, it is not surprising that many features of standard ESL pedagogy are not well suited to the needs of FS teachers and students.

The pedagogical techniques of FS are relatively simple in concept and straightforward in application. The dominant themes are comprehensible input and communication. The pedagogical design of each FS module aims primarily at

creating opportunities for the exchange of meaningful, topic-centered language: as much as possible, of the highest possible quality, at the appropriate levels of difficulty, through the appropriate channels, with due regard for the focal, foundational, and instrumental skills of the module. The target language itself serves as the medium of instruction, not as the topic. In general, the FS pedagogy can be characterized as analytic and noninterventionist. The language is presented in intact chunks and the teachers and students can share in decision making (Long & Crookes, 1992).[2] Vocabulary, grammar, and other language components are allowed to develop naturally. There are no syllabi of subskills and no artificial exercises. Within these broad guidelines, teachers are encouraged to create and share their own pedagogical ideas.

Excellent FS materials are readily available from ordinary sources such as video stores, bookstores, periodicals, and libraries. Some specialized ESL materials can be used in FS, but they play a modest role. The Listening Module relies mainly on video movies and realia. Students in the Reading Module have enough background in the language to deal with the types of light reading materials advocated by Krashen (1993, pp. 46–64). Writing students can read more advanced materials, which serve as input and stimuli for their writing projects. Teachers and students generally collaborate in the choice of materials and topics; these are not imposed from above.

3. EMPIRICAL COMPARISONS

Because the FS approach is so different from the SM, it is important to compare learning outcomes. If FS offers an effective option for program design, the profession at large needs to be informed of this. If, on the other hand, FS students are suffering any disadvantages, corrective action needs to be taken as quickly as possible.

The research reported here must be regarded as providing only tentative answers to the questions raised. An opportunistic strategy has been followed in gathering data, taking advantage, whenever possible, of test results that were generated for program-internal purposes, and causing as little inconvenience as possible for the students, teachers, and administrators of the programs involved. In some cases, quite small numbers of subjects contributed data, and the conditions under which measurements took place could not be completely standardized. Variables such as age, sex, and national/linguistic background were not recorded in most instances and are not controlled for; however, the student populations of the various programs are probably not too dissimilar.

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[2]*Analytic* means that the pedagogy relies on the student's ability to analyze the language as an integral part of the acquisition process.

3.1. Skill Acceleration

One of the basic assumptions of the FS approach is that the acquisition of a skill can be significantly accelerated if students with high acquisition potential in the skill spend 3 hours a day in classes that focus on the skill. In order to test this assumption, an investigation of short-term gains in skill was made, using data from the programs designated FS1 and SM1.

The FS Proficiency Assessments were used to measure progress in both programs. These tests have been found to have satisfactory reliability (Hastings, 1992a) and high correlations with TOEFL (Hastings, 1992b). The Listening Assessment is recorded on tape; each of the 60 items consists of a dialogue followed by a yes/no question. The Reading Assessment consists of 20 paragraphs, each followed by three yes/no questions, for a total of 60 items. The Writing Assessment is a 12-paragraph, 120-item C-Test. Scores are expressed as percentages; the Listening and Reading scores are adjusted for guessing. Parallel forms of the instruments were used as pre- and posttests.[3]

The FS Proficiency Assessments were given in SM1 during the first and seventh weeks of the 1993 spring semester. There were seven levels of classes, from pre-1 through 6. Each student took only one of the three tests. Students in Levels Pre-1 and 1 took the Listening Assessment; those in Level 2 took either the Listening or the Reading Assessment; and students in the top four levels took either the Listening, the Reading, or the Writing Assessment. The FS1 data came from regular testing in the Listening, Reading, and Writing modules during the beginning 4-week periods of the 1992 fall semester, the 1993 spring semester, and the 1993 summer session. Students took only the test appropriate to their current module.

Because of the selective effects of the FS placement procedure, the pretest means of the students in the two programs were quite different; this made the comparison of their gain scores difficult to interpret. To remedy this, the data from the SM1 program were truncated by discarding subjects whose pretest scores were outside the range of the FS1 program scores and then truncating further as needed to match the FS program data as nearly as possible. Because the interval between pre- and posttests differed in the two programs, the raw gain scores were divided by the number of weeks (six at SM1, four at FS1) to find the weekly gains. The FS1 students had much larger weekly gains on all three tests (Table 3.1).

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[3]Although it might be suspected that the use of the FS tests would bias the comparison in favor of the FS students, this is probably not the case. The contents of these instruments are not related in any way to the material covered in the modules: they are proficiency assessments, not achievement tests. The tests are never practiced, previewed, or reviewed, and items are never discussed with the students. During the time of this study, the FS students had no more exposure to or preparation for the tests than the comparison group did.

TABLE 3.1
Accelerated Skill Gains

Test	Group	N		Pretest	Posttest	Weekly Gain	Effect Size
Listening	FS1 Listening Module	74	M	20.8	43.0	5.6	1.81
			SD	18.8	26.9	4.6	
	SM1	42	M	20.7	27.0	1.0	
			SD	20.7	25.0	2.5	
Reading	FS1 Reading Module	49	M	32.9	48.4	3.9	1.04
			SD	15.6	20.8	4.4	
	SM1	37	M	32.8	40.2	1.2	
			SD	15.0	18.2	2.6	
Writing	FS1 Writing Module	24	M	57.6	66.2	2.2	1.08
			SD	10.2	11.9	2.4	
	SM1	27	M	57.4	61.3	0.7	
			SD	6.1	9.5	1.4	

A t-test for independent samples was performed; all of the differences in weekly gain scores are statistically significant ($p < .001$ for Listening and Reading; $p < .02$ for Writing).[4] Furthermore, the effect sizes are all quite large.[5] It seems safe to conclude that skill acceleration is indeed being achieved in the FS modules. But this finding does not guarantee that FS students make higher skill gains overall, because it is possible that the other skills lie dormant while the focal skill is being accelerated. In the next section I examine this issue.

3.2. Emergent Skill Development

The concept of *emergent skills* is important in the program-design philosophy of FS. It is assumed that Listening students will make some gains in reading, and perhaps in writing as well, and that Reading students will develop some writing ability, even though they do not do any work aimed specifically at those skills until they have reached the modules that focus on them. But do skills actually emerge in this way? If they do, then FS students are in effect enjoying "free" skill gains that come about as beneficial by-products of work focused on another skill. On the other hand, if skills do not emerge as assumed, then the rapid gains in the focal skill may be largely offset by a lack of progress in the other skills, resulting in little or no overall advantage.

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[4]SPSS Release 4.0 for Macintosh was used for the statistical analyses in this study.

[5]The effect size is computed by subtracting the SM1 mean gain score from the FS1 mean gain score and then dividing the difference by the standard deviation of the SM1 gain scores. I am indebted to Stephen Krashen for pointing out the usefulness of effect size in comparisons of this kind.

TABLE 3.2
Emergent Skill Gains

Test	Group	N	Pretest	M Weeks	Weekly Gain
Reading	FS Listening Module	37	30.9	8.8	1.5
	SM1	50	30.5	6.0	1.3
Writing	FS Listening, Reading Modules	33	39.1	8.5	1.4
	SM1	38	39.2	6.0	1.5

In the FS1 program, new students normally take all three skill assessments, giving us pretest scores in all the skills. Thereafter, they take only the test for their current module until they pass it; then they take the next assessment in the sequence. Students who are still in the program at the end of the semester often retake the entire battery (although some do not). From these sources, we can obtain a certain amount of information about the development of emergent skills in FS programs. Emergent skill gains were computed and divided by the number of weeks between pre- and posttest. The weekly gains are shown in Table 3.2 and are compared with the weekly gains of matching groups of the SM1 students.

The FS1 students' emergent skill gains are virtually identical to the gains of the SM1 students. It appears that rapid progress in a focal skill is indeed accompanied by respectable gains in emergent skills, as the FS program design assumes.

However, these short-term studies of accelerated and emergent skills do not necessarily tell us how well FS students do over longer periods of time, especially when the skills are considered together rather than separately. The next section presents the results of a semester-long study that addressed the question of global skill development.

3.3. Global Skill Development

Two FS programs (FS1 and FS2) and one standard program (SM2) participated in this study. The FS Proficiency Assessments were administered at the beginning and end of the 1992 spring semester in all three programs; all the students took all the tests.[6] In the two FS programs, the interval between pre- and posttests was 16 weeks; it was 15 weeks in the SM2 program. Gain scores were computed and expressed as mean weekly gains. The gains in the two FS programs were virtually identical, so their data were combined for comparison with the SM2 data (Table 3.3).

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[6]Scores from FS program students who began the semester in the Advanced Module were not included in this study, since they did not participate in any of the actual FS modules.

TABLE 3.3
Global Skill Gains

Test	Group	N		Pretest	Posttest	Weekly Gain	Effect Size
L, R, W	FS1, FS2	46	M	98.1	166.3	4.3	1.75
			SD	65.3	53.2	2.3	
	SM2	17	M	98.7	116.4	1.2	
			SD	54.7	71.8	1.8	

The weekly gains of the FS students are significantly greater than those of the SM2 students ($p < .001$); the effect size is also quite large. This result suggests that FS students make good progress in global proficiency over the course of a semester regardless of which module they are initially assigned to.

3.4. TOEFL Gains

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a well-regarded and widely used measure of global English proficiency that affects the careers of many thousands of international students every year. It is therefore important to determine whether FS students make satisfactory progress on this measure. The study reported in this section compares TOEFL gain scores of students in FS1 and SM2.

The SM2 students are required to take the institutional TOEFL as a placement/exit instrument at the beginning and end of every semester; this comparison uses data from 1991–1992. FS1 normally offers the institutional TOEFL on a voluntary basis only at the end of each semester. For this study, the TOEFL was administered to all the FS1 students during the 2nd and 16th weeks of the 1992 fall semester.[7] TOEFL gain scores were computed and expressed as weekly gains to compensate for the unequal intervals at the two institutions. The results are displayed in Table 3.4.

The FS1 students had somewhat higher weekly gains, although the difference falls short of significance ($p = .195$) and the effect size is rather small. These findings suggest that FS students do at least as well as typical SM program students, as far as TOEFL gains are concerned.

3.5. Other Comparisons

The comparisons examined so far have involved global proficiency and the specific language skills addressed by the FS modules. A number of other skills and language components, including vocabulary, grammar, speaking, and com-

[7]As in the previous study, scores from students who began the semester in the Advanced Module of the FS program were not included.

TABLE 3.4
TOEFL Gains

Test	Group	N		Pretest	Weekly Gain	Effect Size
TOEFL	FS1	27	M	428.3	3.0	.22
			SD	46.1	2.6	
	SM2	75	M	427.6	2.4	
			SD	47.0	2.5	

position, are not the focus of any FS module. Are FS students deficient in these areas? In this section I present evidence bearing on this question.

3.5.1. Vocabulary

The FS approach assumes that vocabulary is acquired through exposure to comprehensible input. Since the main business of the modules is to provide such input, no special vocabulary work is deemed necessary. Many SM programs, however, devote considerable time and energy to vocabulary instruction. The SM1 program follows this approach, using special vocabulary textbooks, exercises, and quizzes. Ruffu and Rogal (1993) examined the rates of vocabulary growth in the FS1 and SM1 programs. They found that the FS1 students had slightly higher vocabulary gains, although the difference was not significant. This finding implies that the FS policy of allowing vocabulary to be acquired naturally is at least as successful as the SM practice of focused vocabulary work.

3.5.2. Grammar

Grammar is another area where the FS approach relies on acquisition through comprehensible input rather than explicit instruction. The most direct evidence available at this time concerning FS students' acquisition of grammar comes from their gain scores on TOEFL Section 2 (Structure and Written Expression). We can compare these with the corresponding scores for the SM2 students, who studied grammar as part of their curriculum. As in the case of the total scores, the FS1 students had somewhat higher weekly gains on Section 2 than the SM2 students, but the difference was not statistically significant. The evidence suggests that FS students acquire grammar at least as well as students in SM programs.

3.5.3. Speaking

Like vocabulary and grammar, speaking is simply allowed to emerge in the FS approach. There is no speaking module, and students are not ordinarily called on to do any practice or demonstration speaking; rather, they are given opportunities to speak voluntarily as a natural part of classroom interaction. Standard programs such as SM1, however, usually devote part of their regular curriculum

to focused activities in which students are expected to practice various aspects of speaking. The speaking abilities of FS1 and SM1 students were compared at the end of the 1992 fall semester, using a sentence repetition test (SRT).[8] Only the Level 6 students (the most advanced) at SM1 took the SRT, so they were compared with the students in the Advanced Module at FS1. The FS1 mean score was slightly higher, but the difference was not significant. This finding suggests that FS students learn to speak as well as students in SM programs.

3.5.4. Composition

The FS Writing Assessment (described earlier) measures a student's command of the lexical, grammatical, and orthographic aspects of the written language, but it does not test composition writing ability. FS students do not even begin to work on writing until they reach the Writing Module. Even then, their writing is generally informal, self-directed, and exploratory. We would therefore not expect them to be as adept at timed, topic-controlled composition writing as students in a SM program where composition is taught at all levels.

The SM2 program uses a TWE-type essay as part of its placement/exit testing. The same essay prompt and time limit used in SM2 in December 1992 were used at FS1 and SM1, in order to investigate differences in the composition abilities of FS and SM students. The SM students had somewhat higher mean scores (3.2 vs. 2.8 on a 6-point scale). The FS Advanced Module students had a mean score of 3.6, only slightly lower that the SM Level 6 students (3.8).

It is known that composition scores are closely correlated with global proficiency measures such as the TOEFL (Jacobs, 1987, p. 87); in our sample, the correlation coefficient between the composition scores and the TOEFL scores was .81. Composition is probably a partially emergent skill in the terminology of this paper. By the time FS students reach the Advanced Module, they appear to have developed composition skills nearly the equal of their SM counterparts, even without any focused instruction.[9]

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

All of the comparisons presented here must be interpreted with caution. The samples were small, background variables were not controlled for, and the con-

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[8]SRTs have been found to correlate very well with other measures of speaking ability, including oral interviews; some of the correlations range as high as .92 (Radloff, 1991). The SRT used here was created specifically for this study and is not a refined or well-documented instrument; however, on the basis of limited data, its internal reliability index is good (.92), and its correlation with TOEFL (.70) is comparable to correlations cited by Radloff between SRTs and other global proficiency measures.

[9]If desired, FS programs can easily provide composition training and practice as part of the Advanced Module, or as an Elective for students in any module.

ditions under which the tests were administered were not as standardized as one might wish. The FS tests were administered before classes began in the FS programs but well into the first week of classes in the SM programs. For this reason, the pretest scores in the FS programs may have been somewhat depressed by the fatigue, disorientation, and anxiety of newly arrived students; this may have given the gain scores in the FS programs an extra boost. The same factors may have operated to elevate the TOEFL gains in program SM2. Since the FS tests have a special function in FS programs, they cannot be regarded as ideal instruments for comparisons between FS and SM programs. TOEFL scores may also be a questionable basis for comparing programs: Many students resort to special courses and self-help materials designed to improve their performance on the TOEFL, and this might tend to obscure differences between programs. The other measures used here (vocabulary estimate, SRT, writing sample) are also open to a variety of criticisms. It is clear that a fully satisfactory comparison of the FS and SM approaches would require a larger number of subjects and a carefully designed study using more appropriate instruments.

However, the comparisons presented in this paper are not without interest. Taken together, the results make sense in terms of the goals and assumptions of the FS approach. The FS approach is designed to accelerate progress in listening, reading, and writing without sacrificing growth in the other language skills and components. All of the evidence that is available at this time suggests that these design objectives have been achieved: FS wins the comparisons that it is supposed to win and holds its own in the other comparisons. Although each of the informal studies presented in this paper can be questioned on methodological grounds, they do seem to converge in their support of the basic design features of the FS approach. Perhaps these preliminary results will attract the attention of other researchers who can contribute to a more rigorous and comprehensive examination of the questions raised here.

At the very least, our comparisons give us no reason to believe that FS students do any worse than students in SM programs. This in itself may come as a surprise to some. The following precepts are widely held in the field:

- All skills must be taught at all levels.
- Grammar, vocabulary, and speaking must be taught explicitly.
- Elaborate syllabi and textbooks are essential.
- Students need to do exercises and drills.

Those who embrace these precepts might expect trouble to follow if any one of them was violated. Abandoning all of them simultaneously would presumably be considered an invitation to certain disaster. Yet the FS approach has done just that. One skill is focused on at a time; grammar, vocabulary, and speaking are allowed to emerge; there is no point-by-point syllabus; and few if any special textbooks, exercises, or drills are used. Furthermore, only 75% of the instructional

time is devoted to the regular FS curriculum; the students choose how to spend the balance of the time. In spite of these radical departures from the common wisdom, FS seems to produce results that are at least as good as those of SM programs that obey all of the standard precepts and use all of the available time for the planned curriculum. Those who are interested in alternative ways of teaching languages may find the FOCAL SKILLS approach worth exploring.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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