MEETING THE DEMANDS: THE CIRCULARITY OF REMODELING COLLEGIATE FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROGRAMS

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field. Although the ensuing debate is necessary and desirable, we must engage in it thoughtfully, productively, and immediately so that we can most fruitfully effect the inevitable changes at hand.

NOTES

1 With deepest thanks to Robin Worth, Ph.D., for her assistance in preparing this contribution.

2 Number of bachelor’s degrees conferred by major (1995–2005) were compared by overall 10-year and most recent 5-year averages across French, German, Italian, Japanese, Spanish, and several other foreign language majors. With the exception of Spanish, all languages had an equal or lower average number of degrees conferred in the most recent 5-year period as compared to the overall 10-year period (UW–Madison Office of Academic Planning and Analysis, January 2006).

3 A recent glance at the ADFL job list found no fewer than 38 postings that included expertise in SLA in the position description. Not only was this area of expertise often required for positions dedicated to language teaching, curriculum, and program direction, but it also was required or considered highly desirable for a number of literature specialist positions, at institutions both large and small.

REFERENCES


Meeting the Demands: The Circularity of Remodeling Collegiate Foreign Language Programs

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The authors of the position paper offer a compelling case and well-articulated agenda for transforming collegiate foreign language departments. What is now necessary is a strategy for meeting its demands. Rather than treat the report in its entirety, I will respond to and expand only on aspects related to curricular design of undergraduate collegiate language programs and the training and development of language professionals. My responses are informed by my involvement in my home department, the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, at Washington University in St. Louis, where I hold numerous positions pertaining to language instruction. For some time, language departments across the nation have been experimenting with change and transformation in both curriculum and professional development. The report points out challenges not yet even fully considered by scholars in applied linguistics, much less language departments. Therein lies the complexity and circularity of the problem—how to address difficult issues and concerns not yet examined by experts in the field.

The authors contend that the goal of “translingual and transcultural competence” can be met by “linking language and content instruction from start to finish” (MLA, 2007). Ideally, in an undergraduate curriculum that successfully integrates language, culture, and literature, students will be equipped with the necessary skills to operate between languages. An overwhelming issue is how to meet this objective for undergraduate programs in departments that consist of language professionals with different skills and agendas, such as tenured and tenure-track professors of literature and applied linguistics, course coordinators and supervisors, lecturers, and teaching assistants (graduate students). All should be integral and important players involved in assuring the quality of the undergraduate program. This interdepartmental “team” should establish common goals for the foreign language program, but these objectives have to be made clear. Unfortunately, it seems that this group rarely meets together to offer collective recommendations. The team must discuss issues concerning continuity in student learning and curricular subject matter within both historical and current contexts of the language program. To initiate this exchange, data concerning existing perceptions of the language program should be gathered via written survey. Questions about overall language program goals, preparation of learners at one level of language instruction for knowledge required at subsequent levels, and how content and instruction currently
are linked, need to be included in the inventory. On this foundation, the team could begin to identify problems and potential solutions, create development plans, and formulate common goals and objectives in the teaching and learning of foreign languages. Throughout this process, the team should consult existing literature on topics such as roles of program directors, study abroad and language learning, roles of special focus sections, and language learning portfolios (see Barrette & Paesan, 2004; Byrnes, 2001; and Byrnes & Maxim, 2004, for suggestions). Unfortunately, to date research and theory concerning curriculum and syllabus design for combining language and content at the university level are sparse. In order to make principled and informed decisions, this lacuna in the database needs to be addressed by specialists in the field before language departments can successfully tackle these problems.

Ongoing professional development should be at the forefront. In order to make informed and principled decisions, those who have the final word for curricular and syllabus design (program directors, course coordinators, etc.) should be required to attend conferences and workshops concerning language learning and instruction, and the university should support this endeavor. If attending conferences is an issue for language specialists because of time and money, the university should host selected speakers. For example, each year at Washington University we offer the Language Learning Colloquium Series, which is financed by different departments and organizations on campus. For the series, we invite three distinguished professors of Applied Linguistics/Second Language Acquisition (SLA) from other institutions to present work on current issues such as language learning and anxiety, language testing, language and power, language learning and technology, and task-based learning. Each speaker delivers both a formal lecture of research and a corresponding workshop with instructional implications. We ask the speakers to provide operational definitions of key terms for nonspecialists. The amount of knowledge gained by professors, language professionals, and graduate students from the leaders in Applied Linguistics and SLA has proven invaluable to the ongoing development of our language program. The series also gives participants the unique opportunity to learn from researchers beyond our university and helps them better understand the research and theory that drives curricular discussions. This series is only one step in meeting the demands in the report. In the future, a series of this kind needs to feature experts who are beginning to address the challenge of combining language and content throughout all stages of language acquisition.

The preparation of graduate students, the future professoriate, should include instruction as central to development. For example, the Graduate Certificate in Language Instruction (GCLI), an option for graduate students pursuing a Ph.D. in literature at my university, requires students to complete five additional courses related to the teaching and learning of second languages. An understanding of SLA processes both enriches knowledge of how the mind works and serves to better inform the ways in which foreign language instructors design and implement curricular approaches for different levels and skills. Additionally, the advanced graduate students enrolled in the certificate play a critical role in ongoing language program assessment and evaluation as they communicate concerns and suggestions to course coordinators or those in charge of making final curricular modifications and decisions. Lee (1989) emphasized that language instruction should not be an individual effort or a haphazard, unprincipled, eclectic collection of tips and techniques, and he offers suggestions concerning ongoing professional guidance and support for graduate students. With this in mind, the GCLI serves two major purposes: to provide ongoing training and development to Ph.D. students in literature and language specialists, and to continuously evaluate and improve the undergraduate language program. This certificate for graduate students begins to address the challenge of redesigning undergraduate programs and training graduate students; however, it does not yet specifically deal with what the report demands—the integration of language and content. Again, this goes back to the dearth of research and theory concerning the topic.

The goal of most language programs is to produce advanced language learners, which often means reaching "native-like" ultimate attainment. However, the issue of "advancedness" has yet to be fully addressed in the Applied Linguistics literature. In order to make principled and fundamental curricular decisions about language and cultural content, more research needs to examine the phenomenon of "advancedness." The term advanced language learner may lack a uniform definition across universities and within departments, since it means different things to different players. For example, students often say their ultimate goal is to "speak without an accent," and sometimes professors of literature say their goal is for students to read and critically analyze lengthy, authentic texts. Multilingual and multicultural
competence involves more than native-like oral discourse and the reading of target language materials. When developing an operational definition for advanced levels of performance, a department needs to consider the broader contexts of language and culture across all stages of acquisition. In doing so, the department could begin by consulting prior research and theory related to conceptualized language programs as articulated entities. For example, the recent book entitled *Educating for Advanced Foreign Language Capacities* (Byrnes, 2006a) features articles on advanced learning involving cognitive approaches, instructional considerations, and the role of assessment. This timely volume relies on both theoretical and applied linguistics as it treats crucial issues regarding advanced language acquisition. In the volume, Rinner and Weigert (2006) report on a social-semiotic perspective of language programming in the German Department at Georgetown University. The detailed descriptions of a successful program of this kind may serve as a rubric for other programs that emphasize advanced literacy. We all know that examining issues involved in advanced language capabilities is not an easy task, and therefore more literature is needed on this topic. As previously noted by Young (2005) and echoed by Brantmeier (2006), only a small amount of theory and research has specifically addressed advanced language learning. Norris (2006) reports that only two prior books (Byrnes & Maxim, 2004; Leaver & Shekhtman, 2002) directly speak to issues concerning advanced language capabilities. While a recent exploration of the contributions of Halliday and Vygotsky to advanced language learning (Byrnes, 2006b) provides additional insights into the topic, the report's call to reframe language programs will require considerably more literature on issues central to advanced language learning and instruction and, more specifically, to combining language and context.

In their discussion about transforming the two-tiered system, the authors remark that the "...presence of linguists and language acquisition specialists on language department faculties is also an essential part of this vision" (MLA, 2007). This is an integral component not only for professional development reasons, but also for an undergraduate program that combines both language and content. This objective could be partially accomplished by thinking critically and skeptically about existing language programs. The Spanish major in my department, for example, emphasizes literature. However, I am one of two linguists, and we offer advanced linguistic courses as electives for the Spanish major, such as *His-
for imparting the ability to enter and powerfully experience unfamiliar worlds." As we embark on this challenging and most significant journey of redesigning collegiate language programs without language and content divisions, the power and depth that reading brings to the language learning experience will be an indispensable resource.

Language departments across the nation stand ready to engage in constructive action and progress toward meeting the demands of the report. However, without research that specifically attends to the integration of language and content across all instructional levels, the direction their actions should take will be difficult to discern. Many departments already are taking small steps toward achieving this goal, but to enable them to fully realize the report’s demands, theory and empirical research need to be aligned with the educative imperatives that drive collegiate foreign language departments, and all faculty in those departments in turn need to be attuned to both these imperatives and to the research findings. The report underscores these dual requirements.

REFERENCES


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Foreign Languages and Higher Education: A Pragmatic Approach to Change

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The position paper presented for *Perspectives* by the members of the MLA’s Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages offers a far-reaching proposal for restructuring language study in the United States. The committee recommends addressing the nation’s “language deficit” in part by abandoning the “two-tiered” system of instruction in foreign languages and literatures common in higher education, implementing instead a “broader and more coherent curriculum in which language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole.” The report stresses that this “integrative approach” will require increased cross-disciplinary collaboration and a concomitant transformation of departmental curricular and governance structures to achieve the stated goal of helping students develop “deep translilingual and transcultural competence.”

In the following, we would like to focus on several theoretical and practical issues raised by this proposal. While the key term *translingual and transcultural competence* (TTC) is not specifically defined by the position paper or the committee’s report, the recommendations do call for