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ABSTRACT

Many junior college foreign language teachers work in schools which serve a large proportion of nontraditional students. A primary reason for low language program enrollments is that these students often believe that foreign language study is difficult, or uninteresting, or they actually fear participation; their cultural and travel experiences, too, may be limited. Instructors, on the other hand, feel that their cultural training is going to waste. The answer may lie in using a different kind of expertise. Some success has been shown with classroom studies of foreign language-based cultures in the western hemisphere, such as Chicano civilization. The teacher equipped with other skills and community interests that can be combined with proficiency in language instruction may be the most successful in coping with the pedagogical, sociological, and economic realities of junior college teaching. (MSE)

The Junior College Foreign Language Teacher: A New Renaissance Person?

Rosemary Hyde Thomas

Many junior college teachers of foreign languages work in colleges which serve a large proportion of "non-traditional" students: people who lack traditional preparation for college, traditional aptitudes for college, traditional interests for college. A majority of these students either have not yet chosen a specific career goal, or wish preparation for one of the many technician-level careers to which two years of specialized training give access. More and more of these students are adults who are already employed, and who are going to school for personal enrichment, to receive veterans' benefits, or to train for new jobs different from those in which they are already employed.

Before wondering how people should be trained for foreign language positions in such institutions, it would be interesting to examine the role that foreign language learning might be expected to play for these students. It would be wise also to examine the opportunities and frustrations that junior college foreign language teachers often experience, and to try to discover what personal and professional skills would best enable them to seize the opportunities and cope with the frustrations.

Forest Park Community College in St. Louis is one such institution. It is an urban college, serving city dwellers and some citizens of inner suburbs of a large metropolitan area. According to annual statistics published for the fall 1974 semester, approximately 61% of its student body is made up of minority group people, mostly black. Approximately 43% of first-time freshmen are financially self-supporting, and 70% of returning students classify themselves as "financially independent". Median parental income is about $8,000 annually. Approximately 61% of incoming freshmen declare that they plan to choose a liberal arts major for an eventual B.A. from a four-year college or university. However only about 35% of these same incoming freshmen estimate that chances are good that they will get a bachelor's degree. The median first-time or returning Forest Park student had a high school average of about C+. About 23% of first-time freshmen are 22 years of age or over. But 68% of returning students are over 22, and 46% of returning students are over 26. These figures do not include "Continuing Education" (adult extension) students.

Given the fact that most of the local colleges and universities, to which a majority of our transfer-students go, retain foreign language requirements at either the institutional or the departmental level, one would assume that at least 10-15% of our total student body should enroll at some time ina foreign language course or sequence. However, in any semester, the number of students enrolled in all foreign language courses together corresponds roughly to about 3% of the college's head-count enrollment. And of the students who elect a foreign language each semester, at least half are enrolled for purely personal reasons, and will never use their foreign language training for any professional or academic purpose. Only about 10% of the students who enroll in foreign languages in any semester enroll primarily because of a future language requirement.

We know from frequent surveys of counselors, and from frequent counseling experiences, that a majority of those who will eventually need a foreign language academically or professionally refuse to elect one until it will become absolutely necessary at some future date, because they are scared. They believe that foreign language study is difficult, and that they have little chance of passing a course in it. They are also convinced that they have nothing of interest to learn from studying a foreign language. But their prime feeling about foreign language classes tends to be an almost palpable fear. This is a fear that is often based on hearsay, for approximately 30% of the people who do enroll in foreign languages have never before studied any foreign language.

Students who do elect to take a foreign language have an average reading level in English of about tenth grade. Their median performance on the Modern Language Aptitude Test is at the 35th percentile. It is generally thought that the average academic level in foreign language classes at the college tends to be higher than in other college-transfer courses. Informal observation would tend to support this hypothesis.

By and large, these students, even the better ones, read little, and have little experience or interest in serious Culture. They have rarely ever chosen to read a classic, or attend a concert of serious music, or even to attend a museum art exhibition. They know little of cinema as an art form. A majority of them have never travelled more than 400 or so miles away from home, and have no immediate interest in doing so. A large number are supporting spouses and/or children, and have full-time jobs. They have almost no time to do homework and do not anticipate the kind of leisure time that would allow them in the future to accelerate their cultural pursuits. This is not to say that the college should not attempt to give them some contacts with and some learning about serious culture. It does this in many ways. However, where the emphases of foreign language courses are primarily serious culture and world travel--aspects of life in which their interest is already weak and their experience deficient -- this tends to reinforce their already negative feelings about learning a foreign language.

These descriptions may sound very pessimistic to those whose orientation is toward the acquisition of foreign language knowledge for the purpose of learning European Culture (literature, art, philosophy, architecture, history) and cultures. And this is precisely the point. My experiences with young Ph.D.'s trained for college foreign language teaching indicates that they are very knowledgeable about Culture, and relatively knowledgeable about European cultures. They tend to view the learning of basic levels of a foreign language as a sort of drudgery that everyone should be willing to endure for his or her own good. They conceive that the rewards for successful basic foreign language learning will occur at the intermediate and advanced levels of learning, where literature can be dealt with seriously. These young teachers feel frustrated when they discover that the rewards they offer do not appear rewarding to the majority of their students, and that in any case they will never get to teach "explication de textes" or literary translation, or even literature in translation, except on a tutorial basis with one or two students, because of paucity of demand. They tend to feel -- and rightly so -- that a large part of their training and expertise is going to waste.

The answer probably lies not in less expertise, but in different kinds of expertise. Because many junior college students tend to espouse lower-middle class and working-class values, leading to an involvement with popular culture rather than with high culture, does not mean that they are immature or unintelligent, or even non-demanding. They are none of these things. But their motivations and interests are different from those of the middle and upper-middle class students which higher education has traditionally aimed to serve. Their perceptions of their academic selves and of their goals and abilities are different too. These students are beginning to make their presence felt, of course, in many colleges and universities, but not in the concentrated numbers that we see at the junior college level.

At Forest Park we have found a number of avenues which have enabled us to answer some of the aspirations and interests of our students through foreign language learning. We have also found a number of avenues which would do so if we only had someone on the staff with the right kind of training. We have learned that whenever we find a way to answer real needs of students, we can count on an influx of new foreign language students who otherwise would have paid us no heed. We have likewise learned that whenever we figure out how to better satisfy students'needs and interests within our courses, our enrollment is helped by a better rate of retention from one semester to the next.

One area of studies to which our students seem to respond enthusiastically is foreign-language based cultures within the western hemisphere. One-half of the students in the Spanish department are enrolled in courses of Latin-American and Chicano civilization. We could draw a similar response in French if we had any staff with expertise in such areas as Francophone literature and culture, the French in America, and the Caribbean or West African history and cultures. But we don't have people with that kind of training. Someone who had studied North American French history and cultures would be a real asset to a junior college French department.

Another area of success for foreign languages at Forest Park has been in remedial studies. We have participated for a number of years in an interdisciplinary communication skills program called "Language Insight". In this program, a team of four instructors (one each for composition, speech, reading, and foreign language) works for a semester with a section of twenty-five students, mostly adults, who wish to re-adapt to school. The goal is to give them basic communication skills and a fundamental insight into the workings of language. Without training in linguistics, which furnishes the real common ground for the four disciplines, it is difficult for instructors to participate successfully in the program. And yet, the inclusion of foreign languages in this program has increased foreign language enrollment in the college by 30%. And 20-30% of each semester's Language Insight students -- people who for the most part were originally paralyzed with fear at the thought of taking a foreign language -- take a second semester foreign language course independent of the program. Ninety-eight percent of the others have overcome their fear of foreign languages, and feel that they benefitted from having studied a language other than English.

We have increased the satisfaction and thus the retention of our second and third semester students by calling upon specific avocational skills of our foreign language staff. Students participate for credit in such community-related uses of their foreign language skills as French lessons for nursery school children, historical research into the local French heritage, feature-article-production for local newspapers on such topics as the interaction between French and Vietnamese cultures. Any such project -- and they have been successful teaching techniques from the standpoint of pedagogy and motivation -- demands practical expertise of the directing faculty members in fields other than foreign language. Skills in early childhood education, journalism, photography, social science research, social work, music, cinema, and many others, open wide opportunities for junior college foreign language instructors to bring foreign languages within the range of the students' already existing interests and needs. We work with students who tend to be attuned to practical activities, effects, and benefits. More of our college's students are interested in learning a foreign language, and learning more of it when such activities are open to them. But we can't do such thing without broad instructor expertise and interests.

Many other opportunities for teaching foreign languages to new segments of our clientele are barred to us at our college because we do not have the proper kinds of staff expertise. Many junior college students would enroll in and benefit from social sciences courses like European and American history, political science, geography, geology, sociology, that would be taught with an international emphasis, perhaps with a bilingual reading list and a choice of English or foreign language discussion groups. But to do this we would need faculty with double credentials, in foreign language and in a social science. It would also be possible to tie in foreign languages with career training, and with other areas of knowledge: for example, business, nursing, hotel and restaurant management, international politics. But again we need staff with double credentials of one kind or another in order to pursue these options seriously.

In addition to the above intellectual, sociological, and pedagogical considerations, there is also a political aspect to the question of what junior college teachers should be trained to expect and to do. Many foreign language departments in junior collegesare small, and many are at least somewhat vulnerable to budget and staff cuts in response to tight budgets. In a small, vulnerable department, the individual instructor must play many roles, and must know how to be heard and heeded, not only by his or her own chairperson, but by the whole administration. This involves being showman, politician, PR person, mediator, conciliator, manager, budget expert. However, generally speaking, the departments in which prospective junior college foreign language teachers receive their training are small empires of their own, in which graduate students are relatively sheltered from extra-departmental struggles and concerns. Such an environment simply does not prepare one for the skills necessary to maintain a small program in a viable position vis à vis a whole institution.

From all of these considerations, it would appear that the ideal junior college foreign language teacher might well be a kind of renaissance person, with capabilities cutting across traditional boundaries and concerns. Of course some of what I have described here would not be particularly applicable to exclusive private junior colleges, or to some community colleges in affluent suburban areas. But most of these characteristics are shared by a large number of community colleges -- urban, suburban, and rural -- to at least some degree. This is especially true if they serve mostly lower-middle-class and blue collar students -- people whose life style in the past ordinarily has not included higher education.

Some of the kinds of training experiences which would seem likely to prepare a prospective junior college foreign language teacher to cope with the kind of situation I have been describing, might be:

-near-native fluency in a foreign language

-substantial experience -- at least one year -- in a country where that language is spoken

-fairly thorough acquaintance with the cultures, literatures, and history of "third world" and American peoples who use the foreign language, as well as with the social culture and history of the "Mother country" of the language in question

-Some knowledge of major literary movements and figures in the foreign language, in non-European as well as European countries.

-an internship of at least a semester in a junior college foreign language department

-training and experience in the creation and adaptation of pedagogical materials

-basic knowledge of the principles of linguistics, psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics, with some acquaintanceship with salient features of minority dialects of American English

-basic or advanced training in one of the following: business, one area of the social sciences, English (particularly linguistics and writing); or practical knowledge and experience in one career field that relates easily to foreign languages: health fields, social work, secretarial, motel or restaurant, journalism, etc...

-basic knowledge of the history, language, and culture of at least one North American minority group

-basic knowledge of the history, philosophy, and goals of the so-called "junior college movement"

-basic knowledge of scientific methodology as applied to educational, sociological, or psychological research

-Approximately 50-60 graduate credits in all of the above areas combined

Obviously there are other directions to take in approaching the question of training junior college foreign language teachers. No matter how the question is approached, however, the priorities and the people typical of junior colleges will need to be considered. These recommendations are based on a number of years of experience of one person in one junior college. What would we learn if we were to survey junior and community college foreign language departments regarding their "ideal" job candidate? I wonder (only half facetiously) if we would agree on anything beyond the necessity for a high level of fluency in the foreign language.

And yet it is undeniable that the main channels for growth in junior college foreign language departments probably lie outside of the traditional literary and Cultural concerns of our profession. This is true if only because of the time limitations imposed by a two-year program. With a limited number of liberal arts students, and an even smaller number of students who enter junior college at a high level of foreign language fluency, the potential for growth beyond our present small enrollment and peripheral role in college priorities simply is not there within traditional boundaries. If the profession is interested in the training of foreign language teachers likely to augment the institutional role of foreign languages within junior colleges, we will look seriously to find new areas of competence for them to bring to the task.

Forest Park Community College
June, 1975