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ABSTRACT

FL-101 is an interdisciplinary, team-taught orientation to foreign languages. It has been designed to accomplish two goals: (1) provide a language-related academic experience for students who would otherwise not have any contact with languages, and (2) attract students to the further study of language. There are nine major components in the course: (1) geography and language; (2) the origins of language and the evolution of dialects; (3) the deep culture of language; (4) the similarity of the Indo-European languages and the differences in the Chinese and Japanese grammatical and writing systems; (5) the analysis and demonstration of sample dialogs in French, Spanish, German, and Russian; (6) the "international" language of science; (7) the genius of literature (sample readings); (8) the arts and language: a survey of music or opera or art or the film in foreign cultures; and (9) beyond language: computer languages, codes and codebreaking, the language of symbols and signs. All four languages taught at Murray State University are represented, and additional lectures are given by the departments of Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, Art, Music, and English. The university plans to write a textbook and possibly will co-sponsor two summer workshops in the teaching of the course. (Author/KM)

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"FL 101: A Cultural Introduction to Foreign Languages"
Paper given at the annual meeting of the South Atlantic
Association of Departments of Foreign Languages.

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The course FL 101: "A Cultural Introduction to Languages" is an answer to a major problem confronting Murray State University: low interest in languages and consequent low language enrollments. Murray State University is typical of the many "regional universities" in the U. S. that have experienced a decline of interest in language study. The problem is aggravated by the fact that interest in languages, especially at regional universities, is minimal since students come mostly from rural areas and see no need for an awareness of a foreign tongue in their careers. In addition, these students are literally "afraid" of foreign languages. This fear usually stems from reports of friends who have had a year of French or Spanish in a small-town high school where the teacher often has had inadequate training and no experience in a foreign country.

Murray State University does have a language requirement for the B.A. degree, with the result that 94% of all graduating seniors elect the B.S. or some other baccalaureate degree. (The two year language requirement is the only difference between the B.A. and B.S. degrees.) The major disadvantage of this inflexible ("all or nothing") two-year language requirement is that most of the 94% of students who turn away from the two-year language option will have had no contact with languages whatever. While it is certainly not imperative that a person who will spend most of his/her life in rural America be fluent in a foreign language, the fact remains that a lack of understanding of the nature and importance of languages and culture constitutes a serious gap in the education of any student.

In 1974 the Foreign Language Department at Murray State University developed an option to the "all or nothing" choice of a two-year language requirement.

A three credit course entitled "A Cultural Introduction to Languages" was taught for two semesters and a summer session (Fall 1974, Spring 1975, Summer 1975). Murray State University has accepted the course as a three-credit choice in satisfying part of the nine-credit general education requirements in humanities. This listing among the humanities requirements provides a student with the opportunity of taking a three-credit basic language course where that student might be unwilling to take one or two years of a language. Students who assiduously avoid the Bachelor of Arts degree at Murray because of its two-year language requirement now have the option of taking a self-contained course providing acquaintance with modern languages and interdisciplinary linguistic concepts and thus fill what would otherwise be a serious gap in their education. This experimental course is an interdisciplinary orientation to foreign languages and incorporates the knowledge of such fields as anthropology, philosophy, sociology, art, psychology, and music as these contribute to the understanding of languages and culture. It is team taught and brings together all eight members of the Murray State University Foreign Language Department for presentations in their specialty.

The Murray State University Foreign Language Department is at present speculating whether this course would actually be a more effective way of attracting students to language study than the present B.A. requirement. If the course continues to attract and interest students at its present rate, it would merit serious consideration as a "mini-requirement" or compromise to the present ineffective*two year requirement. During its first three presentations at Murray State University the course has drawn a variety of students from all five colleges of the university. Students are attracted by the interdisciplinary nature of the course and by the current interest value of the topics covered.

There are nine major components in the structure of the course. These are described in an article published in the September 1975 issue of the ADFL Bulletin.

(Reprints will be distributed.) In addition, it is helpful to see how the lectures are scheduled in a typical 45-lecture semester (three meetings a week for 15 weeks.) (Handouts containing a sample semester syllabus will be distributed.)

The course attempts to teach the students that language, usually taken for granted, is indispensable to human activity, and that the study of foreign languages is a valid and valuable part of their college education. As in the case of any course which is interdisciplinary in nature, it provides an opportunity for students to acquire a greater awareness of the interrelationships among various disciplines. Murray State University believes that the course is unique in its goal of developing the ability in each student to single out language from the environment and to see language for what it really is. The various elements of the course have the unifying characteristic of creating an awareness and a feeling for language in its many and varied manifestations in modern life. Instructors from each of the four languages offered at the university contribute to the course, and one professor serves as course coordinator.

Other foreign language department members and lecturers from other departments present their lectures as an overload. Often a lecturer from another discipline will ask the foreign language coordinator to reciprocate by lecturing to his/her class on a related aspect of language or culture. In this manner a lively interchange of instruction has been achieved among departments.

One approach to the course would be to change the coordinator every four or five semesters. A different coordinator could emphasize areas of his/her special interest, adding to the flexibility of the course without significantly altering the intent or diminishing its effectiveness. The present coordinator is interested in descriptive linguistics and is responsible for including lectures on the Indo-European language family, the evolution of modern English, and differences in language systems.

Certain minor topics of the course are not examined, such as the sample dialogues, the lectures on computer language, codes, and semiotics. (The student is encouraged simply to enjoy these, and most students benefit from not having to worry about note-taking for examination purposes.) Good attendance is required for a reasonable grade; it is especially difficult, without a text, to make up for missed lectures.

The administration is particularly pleased with the course for a number of reasons: 1) it represents an effort by the language department to bolster sagging enrollments; 2) it creates an interest in the individual languages taught at the university; 3) it satisfies a humanities requirement; and 4) it is a miniature interdisciplinary program. The latter is important to the College of Humanistic Studies since interdisciplinary programs and symposia have been instrumental in renewing university-wide interest in the humanities.

The course has improved department morale by enabling the department to put its best foot forward in a course that emphasizes many interesting aspects of language, while omitting problems of grammar and memorization. It also gives each department member a chance to do something positive to improve student interest in the individual languages.

In addition to involving other departments by cutting across traditional lines of discipline, "A Cultural Introduction to Languages" has put the department on the map by showing those in other disciplines that knowledge of and about languages can combine well with their career specialties. The most direct career application noted so far is that several high school teachers in the course have reported using this broad knowledge of language and language structure to great advantage in their own classrooms. Other student testimonials center around the uniqueness of the course and the constant variety of the lectures.



Two of the nine components reflect the main purpose of the course - providing the student with a foretaste of language study. These components are the sample dialogs in French, Spanish, German, and Russian and the samples of the literatures produced in these languages.

Each dialog is a 50 minute experience with a 20 to 30 line conversation taken from a text reflecting a relatively low level of difficulty. The students hear the dialog several times on tape and then hear the instructor repeat it while adding commentary on vocabulary cognates and on cultural manifestations found in the passage. The students then repeat the dialog both in small groups and individually.

The pace for each dialog session is fast and varied, and student interest is maintained for the full 50 minutes. Each instructor seeks to prove to the students that anyone can learn the language and that no word is too difficult to pronounce. A positive reaction to the language is created, and the student feels that he/she could at least recognize individual characteristics of the four languages. The resulting positive reaction on the part of a student from west Kentucky who has never heard a foreign language "up close" is of inestimable value.

Two lectures are devoted to the literatures of each language, and either a short novel or a literary theme from each literature is studied. The list of novels or novellas have included Night Flight, Siddhartha, The Three-Cornered Hat, The Death of Ivan Ilich, and Crime and Punishment. Literary themes have included a comparison of Tolstoi and Dostoevsky and a survey of the German heroic sagas and ballads. Since the course is intended for Freshmen and Sophomores, the level of treatment of these themes is similar to 100 and 200 level survey courses in English departments. The literature selections and lectures are tested, but the sample dialogs do not appear on examinations. The student is encouraged to simply relax and enjoy these language presentations.

The Murray State University course designers have received student comments that the effect of the dialogs and literature selections would be much greater if they were scheduled for different parts of the semester rather than all in the same one or two week period. The reading assignments for the literary lectures constitute the main portion of outside work for the course, and all the four book assignments come due at the same time. For this reason, we would like to try an alternate order of presentation where the syllabus is first divided into the four languages and then each of the nine components is developed for that particular language and culture. Thus, instead of "Deep Culture: French, German, Spanish, Russian" and then "Literature: French, German, Spanish, Russian," all aspects of French would be covered during the first quarter of the semester, German in the second, Russian in the third, and Spanish in the fourth.

"The Cultural Introduction to Languages" has caught on at Murray State, and the language department intends to make it part of its permanent language offerings. However, a textbook is sorely needed if the course is to continue to attract students. At present the only material available to the students is a set of handouts and a list of further reading for each lecture. The most frequent comment from students in all three course offerings is that a text is essential if a student is to feel at ease in assimilating the quantity and diversity of material presented by the course. If a student misses a lecture, he/she will at least have the textbook to give the outlines of material covered in class.

Since the course is team-taught the actual text must also be a cooperative venture and would include chapters written by specialists in the various areas of the course. No one person would be qualified to write chapters for all areas of the course -- topics ranging in diversity from Chinese Writing Systems or Black English to German Opera or Computer Languages. The two course designers will write a number of chapters themselves, and will coordinate the work of the outside authors. In addition, the course designers will plan the basic course

and integrative material for the text, and will write exercises to enhance student use of the text. Appropriate illustrations will be chosen, and each chapter or "lecture" will have an annotated bibliography and suggestions for further reading.

The text will reflect the uniqueness of the course. It will not have the detailed emphasis on topics such as Transformational Grammar and Structural Semantics found in many of the recent introductory linguistics texts. It will not present the scientific detail which is intended for the beginning specialist in descriptive linguistics. It will rather emphasize the many and varied reflexes of language that the student is likely to encounter in daily life.

The preliminary version of the text will follow the general plan of forty lectures similar to the sample syllabus found in the appendix. Each chapter is intended to provide material for a fifty-minute lecture. However, since versatility is a major consideration in the course, the project directors plan to include an additional fourteen chapters to give institutions a certain latitude in selecting lecture topics that will suit the skills and preferences of each professor who uses the book. This element of versatility is especially important since the text will also be used in junior colleges where the language department staff and the staff of other departments may be small and where the principal course coordinator may be called on to teach more than fifty percent of the lectures.

Elements of practicality, economy, efficiency, and attractiveness are of prime importance in planning the textbook concept. If the text were to contain all the interesting elements of each chapter theme it would be a bulky and expensive volume. A possible compromise between depth and versatility would be to offer the text in self-contained modules which could be purchased separately or which could be marketed together in a slipcase. The modules could be structured on the lines of the nine main course components. If one, two, or three components appeared in a module, the price for each unit would not be very high.

The modular approach to the text has the additional advantage of supporting an expanded presentation of the course -- two quarters rather than one semester, for example. We have heard often from our students at MSU that the course could easily be expanded to a two-semester presentation by virtue of the quantity of material covered.

The placement of the manuscript with a major textbook publisher should not present a great problem. The course designers would coordinate their audio-visual aids with the text publisher, and would provide a teacher's manual. The manual will include suggestions for supplementary exercises and projects, and will outline alternate approaches and methods in the presentation of each lecture.

Murray State University believes that the course is readily adaptable to varying departmental language programs, to presently existing language staff skills and interests, and to various levels of instruction, including secondary education. For this reason, the Modern Language Association of America has encouraged MSU to seek grant support for developing the course curriculum and materials, and for establishing two summer workshops in the teaching of the course.

The MSU course designers have lost faith in the traditional language requirements as a palatable device for attracting large numbers of students to the study of foreign languages. Yet it is felt that if the tremendous inherent interest value of foreign languages and cultures can be communicated to students, they would then take a year or two of a language of their own volition. The authors of FL 101 plan for this Cultural Introduction to Languages to fulfill this role.