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# From Orality to Literacy: A Curricular Model for Intensive Second-Year Collegiate Language Instruction

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*Abstract*

*This article documents a curriculum reform of the second-year German program at the Department of Germanic Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. This curricular reform had two goals: (1) compressing two semesters of intermediate-level language instruction into a single semester; (2) incorporating a strategy-based approach to literary reading in the second language. The article will first compare the previous curriculum and then introduce a conceptual framework for the reform process. This framework is based on three distinct pedagogical principles that the article will outline. Further, the article will describe the planning and implementation stages of the reform and trace decision-making processes that relate to the selection and design of teaching materials as well as teaching approaches that target at the intensification of the second-year curriculum. This approach emphasizes the explicit development of literary reading skills to facilitate the learners' transition into the upper-level curriculum. We conclude with concrete recommendations for departments that embark on similar projects.*

## Introduction

In late 2009, the language program of the Department of Germanic Studies at the University of Texas at Austin embarked on a reform process of the second year of language instruction. Responding to institutional incentives to intensify and accelerate language programs, the department decided to replace the two three-credit-hour course sequence that previously represented the second year of German language instruction with a single intensive, accelerated six-credit-hour course. This structural change was implemented in the fall of 2010. It provided the opportunity to rethink and re-calibrate educational objectives and teaching approaches to intermediate foreign language education.

The article documents this reform process, which was led by the department's language program director, who was assisted by an advanced doctoral student. In addition to showing the structural differences between the old and the new curriculum, the article describes the conceptual framework that serves as a pedagogical founda-

tion for the new second-year curriculum. This conceptual framework rests on three pedagogical principles that the article describes. In addition, the article provides a detailed documentation of the planning stages and describes the implementation of the new curriculum. The article illustrates the reform process through a discussion of curricular and instructional materials, as well as an outline of a teaching approach that connects the intensified, accelerated second year of language instruction with the development of critical literacy skills. The article concludes with an outline of the limitations of our approach and provides a summary of our results in the form of a set of recommendations.

### Structural Overview: Old Curriculum vs. New Curriculum

Prior to the fall semester of 2010, the second year of German language instruction was organized as a sequence of two three-credit-hour courses. This course sequence was replaced by a single accelerated six-credit-hour course. The total number of contact hours, however, has remained constant at 90 hours of instruction. In the new intensive curriculum, learners meet three times a week for 100-minute lessons, which are twice as long as the 50-minute lessons that the old curriculum used.

### Conceptual framework

The new curricular structure also required a new pedagogy and provided faculty with an opportunity to rethink our ideas of collegiate second-year language instruction, to redefine educational goals, and to implement innovative teaching approaches that would help our students meet these new educational objectives. If one takes a closer look at collegiate intermediate language curricula in North America, one quickly discovers that, in contrast to beginning language instruction, there is very little consensus among practitioners about how exactly language curricula at the intermediate level ought to be organized. This lack of agreement is not only evident in the curricular materials published on departmental websites, it also manifests itself in a wide spectrum of intermediate-level textbooks, which use radically different pedagogies. In the case of German instruction in the United States, intermediate-level textbooks range from morpho-syntactic treatments of grammar (Donahue, 2008; Sparks & Vail, 2004), via textbooks that expand and deepen communicative skills developed in the first year (Augustyn & Euba, 2008), to materials that are designed to provide a bridge into a literature-centered upper-level curriculum (Motyl-Mudretzkyj & Späinghaus, 2005; Teichert & Teichert, 2005). One of the reasons for this diversity of approaches and materials is the fact that there is no universally accepted model to represents the development of the multiple modalities that constitute intermediate- and advanced-level second-language abilities. As a result, individual departments choose educational goals, teaching approaches, and materials based on a local and often intuitive understanding of the needs of their students. Therefore, the first step of the curricular reform described in this article was a clarification of the goals of the lower-level language program based on the linguistic and literacy skills required of the learner in the upper-level courses. This redefinition had to expand beyond a purely proficiency-oriented model of linguistic skills in order to provide a pathway into the upper-level curriculum. This process resulted in the

formulation of pedagogical principles that would guide decision-making processes. In what follows, we share the educational objectives of our second year that reflect the motivational diversity of the undergraduate student population at a large public Research 1 university that has a foreign language requirement. In addition, we also describe the three pedagogical principles that guided our reform.

*Diverse Educational Objectives as a Result of Diverse Learner Motives*

In our view, the second year of a language program must serve three distinct groups of learners who have somewhat conflicted motivations. The first group, consisting of undergraduate learners who do not intend to continue with the language after the completion of the foreign language requirement, forms the majority of language students in lower-division language classes at virtually all institutions that have a language requirement (Davis, Gorell, Kline, & Hsieh, 1992). While some learner may be merely in the classroom in order to fulfill a language requirement, many of these learners nevertheless expect to reach a level of proficiency that will help them use the language in everyday encounters while traveling to countries where the target language is spoken. This pragmatic skill set can best be further developed through a highly interactive, communicative approach that is typical in beginning language learning environments.

The language program is committed to serving students who are primarily driven by an instrumental motivation. This pragmatic skill set can best be further developed through a highly interactive, communicative approach that is typical in beginning language learning environments.

The second group includes undergraduate learners who do intend to continue with the language after the completion of the foreign language requirement. These students need to expand their abilities beyond a purely instrumental skill set. In addition to communicative language competencies, these learners need to start developing critical literacy competencies that will enable them to succeed in the upper-level curriculum, which consists of classes whose emphasis is primarily on cultural and literary studies. These students have to begin using language not only as an instrument, but also as an analytical and cognitive tool.

The third group we serve comprises those undergraduate students who have not decided if they intend to continue with the language after the completion of the foreign language requirement. Our goal is to attract undecided students into the upper-level undergraduate program by the selection of compelling content and a pedagogy that convinces learners of the learnability of literary and cultural analysis in the second language. Ideally, learners discover that it is not only possible but also intellectually highly stimulating to develop language skills through the analysis of texts and cultural artifacts.

These three varying objectives and motivations should be integrated in a culture-centered and communication-oriented curriculum, which is based on the following three pedagogical principles.

*Pedagogical Principle I: Advanced-level L2 Literacy is Teachable and Learnable*

Many language programs do not explicitly set a foundation for the development of advanced reading and writing skills at the lower level of the curriculum. Beginning textbooks of modern languages tend to devote very little room for the

explicit training of critical L2 reading. These editorial decisions lead practitioners to intuitively assume that literacy skills transfer automatically from the native language into the target language, once the learner has achieved a certain level of linguistic proficiency. This transfer hypothesis, proposed by Cummins (1985), was debunked in the 1990s by Bernhardt and Kamil (1995). Their findings led to the development of the interactive-compensatory model of second language reading (Bernhardt, 2000, 2005, 2011). The model suggests that reading skills do not transfer automatically and effortlessly from the first language into the target language.

Second language reading instruction that focuses on the acquisition of learner strategies can facilitate the transfer process of literary reading skills (Urlaub, 2008). To this end the lead author designed a website (http://wikis.la.utexas.edu/rcst/) that teaches learners how to raise critical questions during their interaction with literary and cultural materials in the target language. The fact that in this environment the students learn how to generate questions inverts traditional classroom interactional patterns and thus contributes to the learners' self-reliance. More importantly, Rosenshine, Meister and Chapman (1996), the National Reading Panel (2000), and Taboada and Guthrie (2006) identified the self-generation of questions in a large variety of educational contexts as a highly effective strategy to help readers critically comprehend written discourse. Specifically, the website designed for this course teaches students to generate four different kinds of questions to analyze literary texts: (1) basic content questions, (2) interpretative questions, (3) intercultural questions, and (4) global questions. The training also teaches learners to use their own questions to organize a critical response essay to literary texts. Throughout the semester, students refine this reading technique by submitting and discussion their questions on the course's online discussion board. Urlaub (2008) has assessed this approach to teaching literary reading in the second language in an experimental setting, and concludes that intermediate-level language learners benefit from explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies. They produce more sophisticated reactions to cultural content presented in the target language compared to learners who do not receive instruction in this particular reading strategy.

*Pedagogical Principle II: Skill-Oriented Approach to Cultural Analysis*

In spite of the recommendations about teaching culture expressed by the National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project (2006), many textbook publishers still design their materials based on the notion that teaching culture is merely the transfer of factual data. Using culture in language classes therefore means for many instructors to simply select, present, and contextualize cultural artifacts that the learner can appreciate with limited linguistic competences and background knowledge. Instructors may teach culture, but they often fail to teach cultural analysis (Galloway, 1998).

In order to teach learners to independently approach cultural artifacts critically, teaching culture must not be solely regarded in terms of appreciation or knowledge of objects, but as the development of an analytical skill. In order to achieve a desired level of interaction, critical cultural analysis — like critical reading — can be taught by means of instruction in the use of strategies. Urlaub (2008) suggests that the strategy-based approach to literary reading described above can also help learn-

ers produce more sophisticated reactions to discourse systems other than literature, such as film, visual arts, and music. Therefore, the new course also used the strategy-based approach described above when learners were asked to interact with these art forms.

*Pedagogical Principle III: Effective Use of Instructional Time*

The time that learners spend on-task must be managed carefully to help college students learn effectively in intensified, accelerated language learning environments. As a result of the limited amount of classroom space available due to the rapidly-growing undergraduate student body at the University of Texas at Austin, the new six-credit second-year class in German needed to be scheduled as three 100-minute meetings per week. Initially, we considered this situation as a challenge, because we had accepted the frequently repeated "fact" that adult learners have a maximum attention span of twenty minutes. Interestingly, there is no research that clearly establishes the length of the attention span for adult language learners. Nevertheless, we concluded that a 100-minute session, even if the instructor schedules a break, could not be organized on the basis of a "warm up/three activities/cool down" pattern typical for beginning and early intermediate language instruction. Therefore, early in the planning stages we decided that the teaching methodology must take the realities of scheduling into consideration. The first half of each lesson, we decided, should be fully dedicated to the development and refinement of linguistic competencies in the form of meaningful grammar activities and the expansion of the learner's vocabulary in a highly contextualized environment. The second half would allow students, mostly through a general deceleration and longer group-work sequences, to apply and solidify newly-acquired linguistic skills in a culture-centered, literacy-oriented environment.

**Planning**

*Fall 2009*

The planning of the curricular reform began in the fall semester of 2009. As a first step, we adopted — still in the context of the old curricular structure — a new textbook entitled *Stationen* (Augustyn & Euba 2008). The response was positive among learners, in particular in regard to the textbook's selection and presentation of socio-geographical content. Instructors also liked to work with *Stationen*, because its modular organization made it relatively easy to add or subtract elements.

*Spring 2010*

In the spring of 2010, we received a professional development grant from the Texas Language Center that funded our course development activities. We used the spring semester to reacquaint ourselves with the research literature on recent curricular reforms in language programs, most notably the reforms undertaken at Stanford (Bernhardt & Berman, 1999) and at Georgetown (Byrnes & Kord, 2002), as well as publications that theorized and promoted systematic approaches to literacy development in foreign language departments (Maxim, 2006; Swaffar & Arens, 2005).

As Byrnes and Kord (2002) imply, a curricular reform requires the support of the entire department. Lower- and upper-level instruction must be tightly inte-

grated. In order to get a better understanding of the entire undergraduate program, we visited those upper-level courses that most prospective majors and minors take immediately after they have completed the language requirement. Countless conversations with colleagues who teach upper-division courses in the department have refined our understanding of a second-year curriculum that we hoped would prepare and inspire language students at that level for upper-level work.

We continued to hold regular meetings throughout the summer to select cultural materials and literary texts. We also carefully analyzed the textbook and decided to concentrate only on those modules and activities that clearly supported the course's educational goals. A few days before the first day of instruction, we introduced our course to the teaching staff who had been appointed to teach the accelerated second-year course. All four instructors were experienced graduate-level instructors with research emphases in German literature, cultural studies, and theoretical linguistics. We discussed the underlying principles and encouraged the group not only to make suggestions in terms of the cultural content, but also to further refine the conceptual framework that guided both our initial decisions and the teaching approach we had developed.

In addition, a few administrative processes needed to be completed. The language program director had to harmonize the new curriculum with the existing placement procedure, which at the University of Texas is conducted by a unit outside individual departments. Moreover, academic advisors outside the department had to be briefed about the new curricular structure, because it changed the pathway toward the fulfillment of the language requirement as well as the undergraduate minor or major.

**Implementation**

*Fall 2010*

We phased in the new curriculum by offering three sections of the new course with a total enrollment of 73 students. During coordination meetings the instructors supported each other in the transition toward the revised learning goals and pedagogical principles. The instructors also collectively participated in the selection of reading materials and the design of activities. In addition, we had the opportunity to share the new curriculum at a variety of professional events with colleagues from different departments at the University of Texas as well as with colleagues at the high school and community college levels. The input of colleagues from inside and outside our institution was helpful in shaping our approach and provided us with rich feedback and helped us to adjust the curriculum.

*Spring 2011*

The experiences from the fall provided us with three insights. First, the course was successful overall. Performance on newly-designed exams and guided essays indicated that students left the course with a skill set that prepared them specifically for the demands of the department's upper-level curriculum. At the same time, more students moved on beyond the language requirement and enrolled in upper-division courses. Second, although the instructors were satisfied with the new course goals,

teaching the course required, an exceptional commitment to teamwork and collaboration in addition to strong teaching skills. The instructors' feedback indicated that more specific pre-semester training was necessary. Third, we felt that there was too much content at the expense of substance. The class moved from one topic to the next in a hectic way. Therefore, we decided simply to skip one more chapter in the textbook and invest the resulting time in activities that intensified the learning and processing of a smaller volume of material. Over the winter, we made the necessary changes in the syllabus and course calendar.

**From the Classroom**

In this section we share concrete classroom perspectives that relate to two issues: the selection of a textbook and the creation of supplemental the materials; and the research-based approach to teaching literary reading in the second language developed by the lead author.

*Teaching Materials & Supplemental Materials*

*Stationen* (Augustyn & Euba, 2008) served several functions for the course. First of all, the second-year German textbook provided the kind of communicative activities that are relevant both for students with a desire to leave the program after the fulfillment of the language requirement and those who intend to continue in the upper-level curriculum on the department. On the content side, the textbook has an emphasis on socio-geographic issues pertaining to Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. This content proved to be relevant for the majority of students. Students with a more instrumental motive for language study could relate to the idea of future travel experiences. Students who were more attracted to the cultures of the German-speaking countries could extract information that satisfied their interest. However, we were less impressed with the selection of longer texts made by the authors of *Stationen*, and we decided to replace these pages with other supplemental readings and activities. Although we certainly realize that there is no perfect textbook, our classroom experiences and our students' feedback confirmed our expectations that *Stationen* is an adequate textbook for the accelerated and intensified second year of German language instruction at the University of Texas at Austin.

We mainly relied on four kinds of materials and procedures to supplement the commercial textbook: interactive PowerPoint presentations; a parliamentary debate format; web-quests based on the websites of German alternative weeklies; and the *Steckbrief* (portrait) format. We describe these materials and procedures below.

The introductory *PowerPoint* presentations, eight slides each, present the main cultural topics of the particular city treated in the chapter and thus provide a schema for the students to ease them into the topic during the first session of each new chapter. All presentations have the same basic structure. The slides are of increasing intellectual complexity. The presentation opens with visual input combined with open-ended questions in order to trigger discussion, critical reflection, and communicative group work activities. After providing opportunities to analyze famous quotations about the particular city, each presentation ends with the introduction of phrases that might be used in a discussion that is thematically connected to the chapter. We consciously designed presentations that consistently prompt the kind of

communicative activities that provide learners with opportunities to interact with each other.

The communicative skills introduced and practiced through the *PowerPoint* presentation were reiterated throughout the chapter and took an important role in a discussion format that we designed to conclude each chapter: the parliamentary debate. This format provides a context for an advanced and in-depth discussion of socio-political topics. Students grouped themselves according to political party affiliation, so the classroom became a small version of the German parliament, the *Bundestag*. The instructor took the role of the Speaker of the parliament. Students had to work in their parties on statements and questions regarding cultural topics, such as "Should Germans be proud of their country?" or "Should there be another Love Parade in Berlin?" The focused group activity phase learners presented and questioned these statements in the simulated plenary.

In addition to these two formats, we designed web-quests that provided students with task-based activities to interact with the websites of German alternative weeklies, such as Hamburg's *Oxmox* (www.oxmoxhh.de) or Berlin's *Zitty* (*www.zitty.de*). Students had to peruse the website in order to find the answers to questions eliciting very specific information, such as what band would play in a specific venue in Munich that night, or what plays were being shown on Berlin's theater stages during the upcoming weekend.

The *Steckbrief* (portrait) format represents another tool that we designed in order to help students navigate through difficult authentic materials. In this activity, students learn to extract specific biographical information from expository texts that describe celebrities who come from the particular German city under discussion. A worksheet provided students with an advanced organizer. These exercises encouraged students to generate questions they might ask the famous person in an interview. The exercises helped students develop the same kind of reading comprehension strategies they had learned to apply to the longer readings.

*Approach to Teaching Literary Reading in the Second Language*

We decided to replace all the textbook materials for sustained reading with supplementary readings. This decision was based on our experiences with *Stationen* in the previous year. The main disadvantage of *Stationen's* text selection and activities was that they did not help our students develop the literary reading skills required for success in our upper-level curriculum.

We decided to implement an approach to teaching literary reading in the second language based on instruction in reading comprehension strategies. At the beginning of the semester, the learners completed the reading comprehension strategy training described above on the website specifically designed to support the new German curriculum (http://wikis.la.utexas.edu/rcst/).

Since the upper-level German curriculum at the University of Texas at Austin has an emphasis on literary and cultural studies, the texts that we selected and the activities we designed needed to fulfill several functions. These texts needed be compatible with the strategies taught for literary reading. We also decided that in our particular departmental purposes the texts should be part of the literary canon so that learners will enter the upper-level German curriculum with high self-efficacy

based on their positive experience with literary discourse in the target language. Finally, the texts should provide a thematic connection to the topic and city discussed in *Stationen*. As a result, we selected the following three texts: A fictional letter from Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks Verfall einer Familie* (1901/1989); Wolfgang Borchert's *Die drei dunklen Könige* (1946/2007); and Heinrich Böll's *Ankedote zur Senkung der Arbeitsmoral* (1963/2006). With this decision, we arrived at an effective course package that aptly emphasized the cultural literacy ambitions of our curriculum redesign.

## Limitations

The article offers a limited view of our process, in that it is a descriptive study and does not include quantitative data that empirically demonstrates that the actual learning outcomes of the new curriculum are similar or superior to those of the previous model. Systematic benchmark data did not exist. Moreover, it was the intention of the curriculum reform to change learning goals and to supplement a language proficiency-oriented approach with instruction towards the development of a literacy-oriented skill set. Due to this substantial change in content and learning objectives between the old and the new curriculum, measurements taken before and after the change could not accurately indicate an improvement. For example, if one had chosen a proficiency-oriented assessment tool like the ACTFL scales and procedures to measure oral and/or writing proficiency, this instrument would not have fully represented the broader skill set that the new curriculum fosters. Therefore, the lack of benchmark data and substantial changes meant that our indication for student learning relies exclusively on unsystematic data: the learner's performance on tests and essays, their feedback at the end of the semester, and the comments of their instructors.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Developments that lead to curricular reform in language programs are often perceived as negative events. This was not different at the University of Texas, where a budgetary reallocation process led the administration to promote the development of intensified and accelerated curricula in individual language departments. Not all stakeholders welcomed this development. In the context of the reform described in this article, however, this seemingly negative situation became a positive catalyst that inspired the department to re-conceptualize curricular structures and pedagogical parameters. The reform we undertook toward an intensified curriculum that more explicitly fosters cultural literacy would not have been implemented so quickly without the input received from the administration and the support of the Texas Language Center.

Reforming the second-year German language curriculum at the University of Texas has not only served the interests of the department and the undergraduate students, it has also provided an opportunity for professional development among graduate instructors. Collaboration with the language program director during the planning and implementation phases has provided graduate instructors with an understanding of the pedagogical and administrative procedures that accompany curriculum reform. These insights are extremely valuable when graduate students apply

for junior faculty positions. Therefore, we strongly recommend working closely with graduate students in these processes. Graduate instructors at many institutions carry the bulk of the language teaching load, and therefore are very sensitive to what is best for undergraduate students. Appropriate participation in curricular development serves as a great opportunity to familiarize future professors with the pragmatic aspects of their prospective job.

## Acknowledgements

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