

Incremental gains in foreign language programs: The role of reading in learning about other cultures

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Most of my adult life, I have been involved in the supervision of teaching assistants (TAs) at large, Research I universities. Currently an Associate Professor of Spanish, I am in my 11th year as Director of the Spanish Language Program in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Prior to my coming to Madison, while a Visiting Assistant Professor of Spanish and then Assistant Professor at Indiana University, I directly supervised second-year Spanish courses, and for one year supervised Spanish (3rd-year) Grammar and Spanish Composition courses; during that time, I also held other administrative positions, serving as Acting Director of Language Instruction for three years and Assistant Director for four. And, before that, as a graduate student at Indiana, I served a one-semester stint as Acting Director and some years before, held a two-year position as “preceptor” (Head TA), as assistant to the Assistant Director of Language Instruction. I have taught the methods course for new graduate student instructors many, many fall semesters since I earned my PhD. It is from this background that I come as I consider some of the issues addressed in the 2007 MLA report.

The 2007 MLA report argues that the two-tiered literature/language configuration in post-secondary foreign language departments “has outlived its usefulness and needs to evolve” (p. 2), and even needs to be replaced:

Replacing the two-tiered language-literature structure with a broader and more coherent curriculum in which language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole, supported by alliances with other departments and expressed through interdisciplinary courses, will reinvigorate language departments as valuable academic units central to the humanities and to the missions of institutions of higher learning. (p. 2)

Such calls for integration and interdisciplinarity come with regularity (e.g., Barnett, 1991; Berg & Martin-Berg, 2002; Byrnes 1998, 2001; Bernhardt, 2002; Burnett & Fonder-Solano, 2002; Byrnes & Kord, 2002; Frantzen, 2002; Schultz, 2002; Katz, 2002; MLA, 2007; MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2008; MLA Report to the Teagle Foundation, 2009; Swaffar & Arens, 2005, to name but a few). The 2009 MLA report gives the following rationale for revising the baccalaureate major in English and foreign languages:

At once structured and flexible, the major in language and literature should follow an integrative, synergetic model responsive to the demands of technological innovation and the realities of globalized societies. The major also needs to accommodate the explosion

of disciplinary knowledge that, in language and literature as in other fields of study, creates daunting challenges while giving rise to new opportunities. (MLA 2009, p. 3)

These calls always evoke in me conflicting reactions: hope along with despair, renewed energy along with weariness. I know my mixed reaction is not unique. The negative reactions occur for various reasons. The 2007 MLA report attributes many of the difficulties and hard feelings to the two-tiered situation that has existed and still exists in many foreign language departments. While the literature tier is almost always tenured or tenure-track faculty, the language tier tends to be non-tenure-track faculty. The 2007 report explains the perspective of those relegated to the second tier as follows:

It would be difficult to exaggerate the frustration this rigid and hierarchical model evokes among language specialists who work under its conditions. Their antagonism is not toward the study of literature—far from it—but toward the organization of literary study in a way that monopolizes the upper-division curriculum, devalues the early years of language learning, and impedes the development of a unified language-and-content curriculum across the four-year college or university sequence. (p. 2)

The subsequent (2008) MLA Ad Hoc Committee report is even more adamant, maybe even strident, about the need to change this hierarchical departmental configuration and governance structure, as evidenced in the following quote:

The two-tiered model has the effect of endowing one set of professionals with autonomy in designing their own curricula and the power to set the aims that the work of the other set of professionals must support The more powerful group—the literature faculty, in this instance—often can be blind to the fact of its greater autonomy and may find it difficult to see the reasons for change that might force the group to share some of its decision-making power over the curriculum as a whole. In order to reframe the discussion so that empowering one group is not necessarily construed as the loss of autonomy by the other group, we would invite the members of the literature faculty to recognize the untenable conditions and frustrations this structure imposes on those who occupy its unempowered tiers. (p. 289)

Although this division does exist in many institutions and the hard feelings and resentment are very real in some places, it should be recognized that some of the failure to implement (or even embrace) these kinds of curricular changes is very often due in large part to institutional realities that exist at most universities. As a rule, all quarters are seriously overworked in academia, and such realities often can get in the way of earnest desires to collaborate in efforts to revise programs. Even minor changes in a program's curriculum take a considerable amount of time, effort, and energy to implement not only at the departmental level but then at college-wide and university-wide curriculum committee levels. And even before the changes can be made, data to support the changes need to be gathered (Brantmeier, 2008), if for no other reason than to provide a scholarly basis for the decisions to change.

Another important institutional reality involves the rewards and tenure systems: the various types of faculty within departments tend to be judged and rewarded by different systems, each imbued

with different “mentalities” and cultures along with different criteria for success and promotion. Certain teaching-related endeavors do not count or weigh much for tenure considerations for literature faculty, so in their pre-tenure years, they are counseled to avoid or limit the time and effort they expend on such activities. More forward-looking institutions have been encouraging their faculty to expand their pedagogical and research profiles. Professional development is a key component to these efforts (Brantmeier, 2008). On-campus discussions and workshops are good, but faculty need to be supported financially to attend workshops and conferences where ideas such as these are discussed. Attending and organizing these colloquia and workshops require significant expenditures of time and expense.

Even though other departments’ and institutions’ realities are not necessarily applicable, colleges and universities and the departments within them can learn from successes at other institutions. They can use what is relevant and workable for their department or institution and can become involved in discussions of this sort (MLA Report 2009, p. 11; for a few specific models, see Byrnes 1998, Murillo 2005, and Swaffar & Arens 2005.)

The German program’s revamping at Georgetown University serves as an excellent model, yet it would be unrealistic to assume that because of its success other foreign language (FL) departments could implement such a program quickly. Rather, it might be more realistic to encourage and attempt more incremental developments because they not only are more easy to implement (and discard elements that do not work) than a full-fledged revamping of the curriculum. The end result may be the same, anyway.

When proclamations are made that FL departments need to evolve, the underlying urgent—at times even strident—tenor engenders frustration and resistance to suggestions for whole-cloth change or to the need to do it quickly. The choice of the verb “evolve” is an interesting one, for it is somewhat problematic. First, imploring departments to evolve suggests that all those who resist certain curricular and pedagogical changes necessarily do not wish to evolve, and with this the implicit comparisons to Neanderthals are evoked. Second, although evolution means gradual change, most calls for curricular evolution carry an urgency, an immediacy. Given the existing institutional realities, perhaps an incremental approach may be better received, and all that some departments may be able to take on unless there is also a move from above to reward and recognize such activities in a significant way. My suggestion here to consider incremental change is not meant to preclude rapid and major revamping of departments, but rather to suggest a more gradual approach when institutional realities are not ready and able to embrace more expansive and rapid changes.

So, what should the role of reading be in the revamped—or evolving—language department?

When oral skills began to be emphasized in lower-level classes, literature was often removed from this level (Brandl 2008, p. 350; Schultz, 2002), so that this is in part responsible for the widening divide between the lower-level (oral) language-focus and the upper-level literature focus courses. The 2009 MLA report also promotes a focus on reading, citing the intrinsic value of the use of literary texts in the major (p. 4), but literature need not and should not be relegated to the major level. Stressing reading and in particular literature—at all levels within the program—is one way that the artificial divide between language and literature courses (and

faculty) can be reduced (Frantzen, 2002).

Brandl pointed out that “[t]he integration of any kind of text in the second language classroom has multiple purposes. On the one hand, texts serve as models for demonstrating linguistic structures; they also function as a springboard for integrating other skills” (2008, p. 346). Given my many years in supervision, I know that despite different and evolving approaches to reading in a foreign language program over the years, with the concomitant greater and lesser prominence given to speaking, it is clear that one of the best and most in-depth means of providing or receiving target language input is via the written text, regardless of the level, and regardless of the medium with which it is presented. Clearly, what is done with a text depends on the course, its level and focus, and the students’ proficiency and interests.

Having reading as a focal point of a department can provide unity and cohesiveness within it. A focus on reading welcomes developments in technology while also accepting and valuing “low-tech” reading of the physical text itself, whether it be a novel, book of poetry or short stories, or a physical, hand-held newspaper or magazine. It is all-encompassing and all-embracing, welcoming technological advances without equating lack of technological use as antiquated and devoid of value. While reaching backwards and forwards, the whole process is forward-moving.

Despite the difficulties cited previously, the area of reading provides many opportunities for renovation and renewal of FL programs. It allows for interdisciplinary (within or between departments) collaboration. We can try out new approaches in various incremental ways: in undergraduate and graduate topics courses, as guest lecturers in each other’s classes. We can do collaborative interdisciplinary research. Linguistic and language analysis of literature is one way promoted by many as a way to enhance the instruction and learning of both linguistics and literature (e.g., Álvarez, 2000; Barnett, 1991; Berg & Martin-Berg, 2002; Cheung, 1995; Frantzen, 2002; Jordan, 1999; Katz, 2002; Lunn & Albrecht, 1997; Schofer, 1990; Vogely, 1997). Many scholars promote inclusion of literature. For a fuller account, including examples from beginning to advanced levels, see Frantzen, 2002 and Scott & Tucker, 2002. Linguistic analysis of literature allows for opportunities for interdisciplinary research. Three excellent examples are Burnett and Fonder-Solano (2002), Byrnes and Kord (2002), and Lunn and Albrecht (1997).

It is important to include all interested parties in the process of curriculum developments, including graduate students (Bernhardt, 2002; Brantmeier, 2008; Byrnes & Kord 2002), not just those involved in language coordination (Byrnes, 2008). Teacher training of graduate students is one way of involving students in the process while also training them for the profession. Although traditional/typical FL methods courses generally include a unit on the teaching of reading, they usually focus on reading done at the introductory level. For that reason, FL programs should consider developing and offering methods courses that focus on teaching reading of all kinds. Such a course could allow TAs who will become university professors or high school teachers to learn ways to effectively offer reading and literature at all levels. These courses would provide another opportunity for interdisciplinary collaboration. Colleagues could be invited as guest presenters to teach particular works of literature or readings that focus on culture. If possible, such courses might be team-taught, which would be another way in which colleagues would learn more about each others’ expertise and discipline. Other training models exist. One example is the Graduate Certificate in Language Instruction which is for students

pursuing a PhD in literature, described by Brantmeier (2008).

Reading is one of the most durable and enduring of human endeavors. Written texts, ironically, by their static nature as they appear on the page or on the screen, become dynamic and alive because they can be reread, and read in different times. Written texts can speak to current and future generations and take on new meanings for different groups, eras, etc.; one way we learn about others is through reading and teaching their texts. Reading is the most natural skill around which to unify a program, a department, even an institution. The many calls for refocusing the approaches used in FL departments and for promoting interdisciplinary research are sound and well reasoned but tend to overlook or minimize the institutional realities that all the individuals involved have to deal with. Institutional support in the form of tangible rewards is crucial for these kinds of developments to be realized. And so it is, when we talk of the importance of learning about the cultures of other peoples, we also need to consider the cultures within our departments and universities.

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