

An Essay on the Role of Language in Collegiate Foreign Language Programmatic Reform¹

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The title of this article might not seem particularly controversial or compelling. After all, is not language or, more precisely, foreign language that which collegiate foreign language departments are all about? The role of language, it would appear, is central, fundamental, and indispensable to what we as members of the collegiate foreign language profession do. As much as we might all intuitively agree with this statement, our actions or lack thereof within the profession indicate a different picture. Specifically, disjunctures between three main areas of our profession highlight the challenges we face as language professionals: (1) the mission of our discipline, collegiate foreign language education; (2) the reality on the ground; and (3) the professional engagement with these programmatic realities. In other words, collegiate foreign language education has not necessarily adopted a consistent or coherent approach to what it is that we are about, to what is actually happening in departments, and to how we talk about it and attempt to address it in professional circles.

It should be added that this is by no means the first time that this issue has been addressed. In fact, there is a relatively long history of presentations and publications on just this topic within German Studies, in particular, and within the larger collegiate FL education community as a whole. Prominent voices within the profession such as Elizabeth Bernhardt, Heidi Byrnes (“Language”), Richard Kern, Claire Kramsch (“Language”), Peter Pfeiffer

(“Preparing”), and Janet Swaffar (“Foreign”) have all argued convincingly about the need to view language as absolutely central to our discipline. Where this piece hopes to make a contribution to this topic is within the latest discussions in the profession about foreign languages and higher education, particularly in light of the recent report by the Modern Language Association (MLA) Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, “Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World.”

Who We Are

To begin, then, it is important to review briefly what seems to be a general consensus about what we do and who we are in collegiate foreign language education with the purpose of highlighting the centrality of language in our discipline. While our field certainly consists of different subfields—literary studies, cultural studies, linguistic study, for example—the common thread that ties all departmental members together is the respective language with which they work. In her 1999 article in the *ADFL Bulletin*, Swaffar perhaps captures the discipline of collegiate foreign language education the best when she proposes that we all, regardless of subfield affiliation, focus on “how individuals and groups use words and other signs in context to intend, negotiate, and create meanings” (7). That

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is, it is language in use, language that is doing something, whether it is aesthetically, culturally, linguistically, or socially, that defines our disciplinary emphasis. Moreover, it is this focus on language in use that forms the basis for both our teaching and scholarship. We research how meaning is created through language, and we teach students how to make and investigate meaning in and through language. How each of us goes about realizing these principles in our own teaching and research is extremely varied and complex, but we all are bound by our study of language in use.

In fact, the variety and complexity of our teaching and research has evolved to such a point over the past 25–30 years that the study of language in use could perhaps be seen as not as central as it once was. For example, whether it has been because of enrollment pressures, institution-specific general education requirements, departmental mergers, or individual scholarly interests, each department has found itself expanding its course offerings to include, for example, courses in English that reach out to a wider student population. Indeed, one of the trademarks of the cultural turn and the move to German Studies has been to branch out beyond the traditional literary canon and offer courses that reflect the broader cultural production of the target cultures. The notion of a foreign language department could even be called into question as teachers and researchers find more logical pedagogical and scholarly connections with colleagues in other fields. Nevertheless, the thrust of this essay is to argue that even these important disciplinary and departmental shifts have not diminished the study of language in use for the profession. To begin with, regardless of the language of instruction or the desired student audience, central to our theoretical and practical work is the in-depth consideration of how meaning is made in and through language. Whether we are offering German 101, a humanities lecture course in English on fairy tales, or a graduate seminar in English on Hegel, we continue to examine language at work for how it functions to make meaning. Furthermore, even for departments that have devoted significant resources to developing courses in English and have adopted a true “mixed language model,” to borrow the term Levine et al. use, the courses taught in the target language still require a significant commitment of departmental resources, if for no other reason than to meet the needs of students fulfilling the institution’s language requirement. In short, language would seem to be inseparable from our core scholarly and pedagogical foci even as we

have witnessed major changes within the profession.

What We Do

Despite this unifying characterization of our discipline, our instructional, administrative, and scholarly practices have often not been very unified, as the MLA report rightfully makes abundantly clear. Perhaps the most notable example of this disciplinary dysfunction is the well-documented, two-tiered structure found in most foreign language departments, particularly those granting advanced degrees. Whether the two tiers are characterized by differing instructional approaches (i.e., communicative language teaching and its focus on oral expression at the lower levels vs. literary and cultural studies and its focus on written expression at the upper levels), differing personnel configurations (i.e., lower-level classes taught by non-tenure track, adjunct, or graduate student instructors vs. upper-level classes taught by full-time, tenured or tenure-track faculty), or differing assumptions about language acquisition (i.e., the need for an explicit and systematic focus on form at the lower level vs. the notion that the language system has supposedly been mastered and students can focus on content in a more naturalistic setting at the upper level), the absence of an integrated curricular framework in collegiate foreign language departments permeates departmental governance and remains deeply entrenched in departmental cultures. This is not to say that departments are not aware of their divided structure. Evidence of this awareness is sometimes best found in specific actions departments or institutions have taken. The infamous “bridge” course, a staple nowadays in most foreign language departments, is one example of departments’ implicit admittance of curricular incoherence and their recognition of the need to address the two-tiered curricular structure. Certainly an important start toward addressing departmental bifurcation, the bridge course represents just one small step in establishing a coherent program of study that supports students’ longitudinal language development in a systematic fashion. An alternative to addressing the two-tiered structure internally through the bridge course is the externalization and institutionalization of departmental bifurcation through the establishment of language centers that provide beginning and intermediate language instruction in preparation for course offerings in the foreign language department. We

therefore cannot blame the situation or not to date, with just a few exceptions, has primarily resulted in institutional frameworks for the

How We Address

In light of the substantially addressed in the MLA Ad Hoc Committee report was right on the mark in its most important recommendation of curriculum reform (17). The committee’s kind of transformation through sustained efforts of members of the teaching community (“Department”) description of the curriculum at the Department at Georgetown. The committee also points out that transformation will be the simple reason that we are asked to teach transformed programs.

What is not as clear is the recommendation for reform. For such a profession, we all are well-served self, but is it

Levine et al. challenge in their article, but by arguing that in many respects not only in collegiate foreign language departments concerns that the profession obscures the profession. They support the 2001 MLA report, the University Foreign Language Center to point out that even so-called “language” and so-called “literary” and “cultural” studies are no longer as rigorous as they once were. We note that there is a significant literature and cultural

The extensive literature on undergraduate language standards

therefore cannot be accused of failing to recognize the situation or not taking action, but our solutions to date, with just a few exceptions,² have not necessarily resulted in integrated, articulated curricular frameworks for the study of language in use.

How We Address Our Dysfunction

In light of the discipline's general inability to substantively address its bifurcated nature, the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages was right on the mark to argue that "by far the most important recommendation" is the "transformation of curriculum and departmental governance" (7). The committee accurately points out that this kind of transformation can only be "carried out through sustained collaboration among all members of the teaching corps" (6), a point that Byrnes ("Department") documented repeatedly in her description of the curricular reform in the German Department at Georgetown University. The committee also points out the repercussions that such a transformation will have on graduate education for the simple reason that the future professoriate will be asked to teach and research in these transformed programs.

What is not as evident in the committee's recommendation for transformation is the actual reason for such a paradigmatic change. In other words, we all are wringing our hands about our divided self, but is it really a problem?

Levine et al. challenge this portrayal of the profession in their article in the 2008 edition of *Profession* by arguing that the two-tiered system is "in many respects not the dominant model" (243) in collegiate foreign language education and by raising concerns that the focus on departmental bifurcation obscures the complexities of the current situation. They support their argument by citing data from the 2001 MLA study "Successful College and University Foreign Language Programs, 1995-99: Part I" to point out that the traditional division between so-called "language" courses at the lower levels and so-called "content" courses with their focus on literary and cultural study at the upper levels is no longer as rigid as it once was. In particular, they note that there is a considerable emphasis on literature and culture at the lower levels and a corre-

sponding strong focus on non-literary texts at the upper levels. They then counter the argument that lower and upper levels represent different pedagogical approaches by citing that "few programs (23.1%) report more emphasis on oral communication than on reading and writing" (245), thus calling into question those who suggest that the current instantiation of the communicative language teaching paradigm is at odds with pedagogies in place at the upper levels. Recognizing the increased focus on textuality and literacy at the lower levels is an important step both in capturing better the realities on the ground in FL departments and in acknowledging the significant work that has been done over the years to overcome the disjunctures between different levels of study. As the aforementioned different permutations of departmental bifurcation indicate, the authors are also right on target in pointing out the multidimensionality of the two-tiered system. Rather than just the traditional literature-language division, there are the central issues of how departments distribute work, how they reward different types of scholarly and instructional activity, and how they conceptualize foreign language education for their students.

Despite Levine et al.'s mixed reception of the 2007 MLA report, the MLA committee also sees the issue as more than a division between language and literature and levies its main criticism of the two-tiered system on its rigid and hierarchical balance of power that privileges upper-level instruction and impedes any substantive collaboration between upper- and lower-level instructors. For example, according to the committee's report, in PhD-granting departments, full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty members teach only 7.4% of first-year courses. The committee also argues that the two-tiered system prevents "the development of a unified language-and-content curriculum across the four-year college or university sequence" and the instruction of language, culture, and literature "as a continuous whole" (3). Although not explicitly stated, one can assume then that the committee sees the division of labor and the lack of a unified curriculum within the two-tiered configuration as an impediment to the achievement of what they see as our discipline's goal, namely, the development of translingual and

² The extensive reform of the German Department undergraduate curriculum at Georgetown University stands out as one particularly noteworthy

example of successfully attending to departmental bifurcation.

transcultural competence. That this criticism is not more explicit in the report is interesting because if there is one thing that second language acquisition researchers can agree on, and this is where the real crux of the matter is in the discussions about the two-tiered structure, is that language acquisition is a long-term proposition, and that the best way to facilitate language learning is to provide a framework that supports learning in a coherent, articulated, and longitudinal manner. To be sure, the imbalance of power and lack of collaboration are counter-productive to effective departmental governance, but if our goal is, to quote the MLA report, translingual and transcultural competence or, to quote Swaffar ("The Case") again, "to do things with words and to recover what has been done with words, socially, historically, politically, and interpersonally" (7), then that really can only be achieved through an integrated curricular framework that considers in a systematic fashion how to achieve these *language*-based goals over a four-year sequence. The fact that departments report that they are including more literature at the lower level and more non-literary texts at the upper level reflects only course *content* and provides no indication that departments are attending in any systematic way to the long-term development of how students understand and use language. We need to be clear that overcoming the two-tiered system is more than a change in course content to include a more balanced distribution of literary texts across curricular levels; equally, if not more, important is the articulation of a coherent language learning pathway for developing students' ability to make and investigate meaning in and through language for as long as they are in the program. In other words, without an integration of the study of language into the study of content in a systematic way across all levels of the curriculum, departmental and curricular bifurcation remains.

How We Approach Curricular Reform

The idea of an integrated curriculum might have both theoretical and intuitive appeal to many, but the question that needs to be answered is why there are so few instances of such curricula. One of the reasons often cited is the belief that an integrated curriculum simply by its very nature of being a coherent and articulated program of study brings with it too many prescriptive elements that will infringe upon academic freedom and autonomy. A typical scenario repeated is one in which faculty

would no longer be able to offer courses they wanted to teach within an integrated curriculum; instead, the courses and content would already be pre-determined. While an integrated curriculum does create a framework in which the subject matter is taught, it does not or should not necessarily prescribe course offerings. True, course offerings would have to reflect the overall curricular goals, but the specific content explored within a course are at the discretion of the individual instructor. Of course, one might still consider this curricular model and departmental structure too restrictive, but then we get into the larger issue of what our role is as instructors within a department. Just as a curriculum is more than simply a collection of individual courses, what Byrnes ("Constructing") terms a "curriculum by default" (269), a department is more than its individual members. A department's strength lies not in the scholarship of an individual faculty member but rather in its ability to work together to realize its goals most effectively and efficiently. Ironically, while collaboration across disciplines and institutions is common within our profession, collaboration within departments is less common. To be sure, as the earlier discussion about bridge courses indicated, there are many departments that have obviously held department-wide discussions to address curricular incoherence, but there remains much work to be done, particularly in the area of articulating how each program will support the long-term development of students' language abilities within a content-oriented curriculum. Without departmental members working together toward shared, public goal, one has to wonder why a department exists in the first place.

It is important to note, however, that we and our recalcitrance toward departmental collaboration are not the sole reason for curricular inaction. In fact, there are other, if not greater, reasons for the current state of the profession. One is the general lack of scholarship on the advanced foreign language learner. This line of research has gained prominence in recent years (e.g., Byrnes, "Advanced"; Byrnes and Maxim; Byrnes, Weger-Guntharp, and Sprang; Leaver and Shekhtman; Schleppegrell and Colombi), but it is safe to say that the profession still has a lot to learn about the nature of advancedness. One of the first issues that needs further refinement is a clearer understanding of what it means to be an advanced user of a language. The lack of a clear definition of advancedness has not slowed the profession's call for its attainment, however. Whether it is the new NCATE

requirements for high academic job advertisement (Gasparro), advanced desired goal throughout the situation is the indicating advanced "advanced" course: lines). In SLA research common way to characterize as Byrnes, Crane ment in an advanced ily guarantee system ment of advanced la without a clear notion use looks like and a c development, learner rely on their existing a Until we have clear search findings about vanced learner, we n geous position to syst dress how to create a that fosters language years of study. With facilitate advancedn text, it should not be tion has been dev ment in upper-level vanced language genre-based perspe shows promise for h stand what advanced we might be able to but to date it has had giate foreign langua que that all departr come SLA specialist advancedness to h standing of what it co plicit and systematic upper-level classes. A related issue to lack of emphasis in g pment on curricula dress the two-tiered graduate programs of a focal point in gra logical person to faci department's resident

¹ According to the period from 1993 in German were f

requirements for high school teachers or the typical academic job advertisement (Koike and Liskin-Gasparro), advanced FL competence is the desired goal throughout the profession. Compounding the situation is the existence of many rubrics for indicating advancedness (e.g., enrollment in an "advanced" course; ACTFL proficiency guidelines). In SLA research, for example, seat time is a common way to characterize learners as advanced, yet as Byrnes, Crane, and Sprang indicate, enrollment in an advanced FL course does not necessarily guarantee systematic attention to the development of advanced language abilities. Specifically, without a clear notion of what advanced language use looks like and a clear pedagogy for fostering its development, learners will have no choice but to rely on their existing abilities to express themselves. Until we have clear guidance based on solid research findings about the instructed collegiate advanced learner, we really are not in an advantageous position to systematically and effectively address how to create an integrated program of study that fosters language development across all four years of study. With so little information on how to facilitate advancedness in our instructional context, it should not be surprising that only scant attention has been devoted to its systematic development in upper-level classes. The research into advanced language use from a discourse- or genre-based perspective (e.g., Coffin, Johns) shows promise for helping the profession understand what advancedness might look like and how we might be able to achieve it in our classrooms, but to date it has had limited reception in the collegiate foreign language community. This is not to argue that all departmental members need to become SLA specialists, but we also cannot expect advancedness to happen without some understanding of what it consists of and without some explicit and systematic attention to its development in upper-level classes.

A related issue touched on earlier is the general lack of emphasis in graduate student teacher development on curricular thinking. If we want to address the two-tiered departmental structure, then graduate programs need to make this much more of a focal point in graduate student education. The logical person to facilitate this shift in focus is the department's resident applied linguist or second lan-

guage acquisition (SLA) researcher who typically also occupies the position of curriculum or lower-division coordinator. Whereas the MLA report suggests that SLA researchers need to be seen as resources for course offerings on a range of linguistic topics, of equal if not greater importance would be their role in helping the department conceptualize a language learning trajectory for the entire four years. In his discussion of the MLA report, Wellmon offers a compelling characterization of applied linguists in this role when he calls for them to be the "organizational fulcrums within individual departments" (295). Of course, adding yet another task to the already exhaustive list of duties that coordinators perform needs to be handled with great care and consideration, particularly in those cases when the coordinators already feel that they are the sole person within the department focused on curricular issues. Added to that is the fact that coordinators, despite their central and important role in curricular planning, as Levine et al. rightly assert, find themselves at times on the periphery of departmental governance. The most obvious example of this is the number of PhD-granting departments that do not have a tenure-track position for their lower-division coordinator.³

More important than assigning roles to specific department members, however, is the larger issue of whether applied linguists or SLA researchers are themselves schooled in programmatic and curricular thinking. Kramsch ("Context") has long argued that the education of applied linguists within foreign language departments needs to be greatly expanded to include coursework in such fields as anthropology, sociology, and communication studies in order to expose them to broader notions of culture and to the interrelationships between language and culture. Wellmon adds to that a call for greater emphasis on work within linguistics (e.g., linguistic anthropology, sociocultural linguistics, systemic functional linguistics) that deals more explicitly with language in use or, to use his characterization, "language as a particular meaning-making system" (293). To those important proposals for an expanded conceptualization of applied linguists, we should also consider adding education in broader, more longitudinal notions of second language acquisition, to the extent that they exist in the literature (e.g., Byrnes and Ortega), so that future

³ According to MLA statistics during the five-year period from 1993 to 1998, 64% of the PhDs granted in German were from institutions that do not have a

tenure-track position for their lower-division coordinator and supervisor of graduate student teachers

coordinators and supervisors understand what pedagogical and curricular setting is needed to promote language development across multiple levels of instruction. Once again, however, because the integration of language and content is not just an issue for applied linguists, teacher development for all graduate students in foreign language departments should foster this type of meaning-based curricular thinking.

The last point regarding the reasons for our collective curricular inaction is the profession's inability to reconcile its desire for interdisciplinarity with its two-tiered structure. Ever since German Studies became a way of conceptualizing our discipline, there has been a push toward expanding our course offerings beyond pure literary studies, but with that comes a couple of potential problems. To begin with, there is a lot of appeal to offering courses that deal with issues in, for example, political science, history, architecture, or art, but, as Sara Lennox rightly asks in her recent letter as President of the German Studies Association, do we have the expertise to teach these other disciplines? Second, if we do not, then are there teacher development opportunities to provide the necessary expertise to teach undergraduates in these other fields? Or, if those opportunities do not exist, are we willing to open up our departments to scholars outside the field of *Germanistik*? And, if we choose to go this latter route, do scholars from, say, political science, history, architecture, or art have the expertise to fully support the department's mission of exploring language in use? As Pfeiffer ("The Discipline") points out in his critique of the MLA report, in all likelihood graduate programs in political science, history, architecture, or art have, for very good reason, devoted even less attention to curricular thinking and language teaching than graduate programs in foreign language departments. The likely scenario, then, of hiring scholars outside of German Studies is that they will not be able to contribute substantively to discussions on the language teaching mission of the department and will thus potentially re-create a tier in the departmental structure just when we are attempting to dismantle tiers.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is worth considering the question posed in the title of the MLA session at which portions of this essay were originally presented. "How Revolutionary Are We? Current Issues on Curricular Shifts at Private Institutions." As the ar-

guments presented thus far have suggested, it is fair to say that we are not very revolutionary, but it is important to quickly add that it not necessary for us to be so. Rather, we need to remind ourselves what it is that we do and then take the necessary steps to do that as well as we can. If we are in agreement that the study of language in use is what distinguishes us from other disciplines on campus, then we need to focus our efforts on developing programs that allow students to carry out this area of study as effectively and productively as possible. This would include a consensus among department members about shared goals, an integrated curricular framework to promote long-term language development, and restructured graduate programs for both literature and linguistics students that would develop their ability to think curricularly. By no means revolutionary, these steps nevertheless only become possible and take on importance if and when we acknowledge that language and its meaning-making potential lie at the core of our disciplinary enterprise.

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