

A reaction to the 2007 MLA Report

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Mortimer Adler and Charles van Doren wisely remind us in *How to Read a Book* (1972) that readers must come to terms with an author *before* beginning the interpretation process. Following this logic, the first question that should be posed about “Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World” by MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages (2007) is what its prose contains concretely and directly. My answer to this question is (a) that there is a continuing and urgent need for more language knowledge on the part of the American citizenry, (b) there are structural issues in the delivery system that impede the gaining of more knowledge, and (c) there are curricular gaps that the current infrastructure, namely colleges and universities, has not perceived, let alone filled. In other words, the statement contains a discussion of a *need* (more language knowledge) and a two part analysis of what *exacerbates that need* (structure and curriculum). “Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World” then moves to a two-part solution: balanced and less-hierarchically organized communication within language and literature departments and the addition of non-literary reading, listening, and viewing materials to the curriculum.

This solution is hardly earth-shattering. Claiming that the United States needs a better-educated citizenry is commonplace at best; noting that there are inequities in the academic system between tenure track and non-tenure track is more than obvious, and arguing for the reading of non-literary texts hardly original. It is this final point, though, that is key for readers of *Reading in a Foreign Language*.

Like any such statement, “Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World” authored by an Ad Hoc Committee of the Modern Language Association, is a political document. It was constructed, like all such documents, by persons who have certain knowledge bases that inform and drive agendas. By and large, the knowledge bases represented on the ad hoc committee are literary criticism, cultural studies, and the politics surrounding and encumbering bureaucracies that are, in large and small ways, involved in the language teaching enterprise. The representatives of these knowledge bases on the committee are all widely published on these cognizant topics. Sadly, and perhaps most importantly for *Reading in a Foreign Language*, is that few, and arguably none, of the persons has ever contributed a data-based study to the arena of applied linguistics. Granted, there are significant publication histories between and among all of the participants, but none of these provide data on precisely the core, yet covert, issue addressed by the report. The core issue is not about structure, but rather it is about the role of upper-level, complicated texts in the development of language and cultural knowledge.

Overtly, the Report claims to be about “the curriculum and the governance structure” (p. 2). “Structure” is given a social spin. The Report argues that all groups in a configuration should talk with one another and language teachers should be in structures so that they can talk cross language. No recommendation is made regarding the literature faculty talking cross-language. In reality, the Report sets up a set of well-worn, almost trite, opposites: instrumental learning (learning language to accomplish tasks) versus integrative learning (i.e., language revealing itself “to others and to ourselves” [p. 2]), “language specialists” versus the “literature faculty” (p. 3), the educated native speaker target versus “engendering translingual and transcultural competence” (p. 3). While the Report calls for the literature faculty having “a hand in teaching language courses and in shaping and overseeing the content and teaching approaches used throughout the curriculum, from the first year forward” (p. 7), it provides no recommendation in the converse—the language teaching specialists having a hand in shaping the upper-level curriculum.

The bitter irony here is that “language teaching specialists” on the current scene tend to be PhD holding academics with significant coursework in literature and culture as well as in applied linguistics. They have research agendas, profiles, and publication records. Often, it is merely the vagaries of the contemporary job market and worn out traditions at many universities that separate them from the “literature faculty”. In other words, the “language teaching specialists” generally speaking simply do not have tenure track jobs. There is no academic credential or intellectual prowess that separates them from “the faculty.” None of this part of the reality of foreign languages within the higher education enterprise is mentioned. Admittedly, “Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World” calls for the elimination of this two-tiered system; yet, it oddly reifies it in its own language. By failing to acknowledge the research base in applied linguistics, the statement gives its tacit approval for the “literature faculty” to remain ignorant of significant research that did not exist at the time of their degrees and an allowance to continue to make curricular decisions with incomplete and often outmoded information.

But what of the curricular dimension of the MLA Statement? Ultimately, “Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World” belies a cultural studies agenda—a move out of literature and into other kinds of topics and texts that some may argue are more broadly representative of the culture at hand. I personally see the wisdom in such a stance. Yet arguing for a shift out of literature with no concomitant attention to the knowledge base for upper-level reading is simply a substitution rather than a systemic change. It is much like voting for the Cultural Studies party rather than the Literature Party. It is mechanistic and not systemic, reifying a political perspective that is wrapped up in a discussion of critical theory and a set of *-isms* that interrogate social structures. But the real question should not be about whose texts are *in* and whose *out*. Clearly, much like any political activity power will shift; today’s *in* is tomorrow’s *out*. The substantive question is *not* about text type and content, but rather *is* about developing an understanding of how complicated texts—regardless of genre and content—can be and are understood.

Addressing structures is always a convenient way of appearing to grapple with an issue without really grappling with an issue. Solving academic issues through restructuring never leads to

change but to more bureaucracy. Systemic change for “foreign languages and higher education” would mean acknowledging and implementing the research that has been conducted on problems directly related to the dilemmas of language learning and interpretation represented in college and university programs. In fact, relying on research knowledge is a far more neutral, a more positive, and far less politicizing force than what is offered in the current statement. “Foreign Languages and Higher Education: Implementing a Research-based Vision” or “Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for Implementing a Research-based Vision” would have been more helpful and insightful. Focusing on research-based knowledge would level the playing field, casting all players in a single category as readers and constructors of knowledge.

What is the knowledge base in applied linguistics that should be guiding the reforms mentioned in “Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World”? Of perhaps most immediate interest is the research base in second-language *literary* reading. We know without a doubt that readers begin their second-language interpretive process on the basis of what they understand and with the interpretive arsenal of their first language (Bernhardt, 1990; 1991). Readers naturally assume that what they find in a French narrative will be “like” the English-language narrative only *in French* (Riley, 1993). What does this actually mean? It means that programs and instructors should exploit this natural tendency. Programs should encourage readers to use what they already know and to make it visible. Instructors should enable learners to talk about what they already know. We also know from an important study by Fecteau (1999) that the learner’s knowledge base entails a broad conception of what literature is and its features. Moreover, word use—simple metaphor, for example—is also an arena in which we have evidence from both Davis (1992) and Bernhardt (1985). Learners are not metaphorically flexible in their understanding of even very simple “known” words. We also know that grammatical knowledge plays a key role in text comprehension. One only needs to look at the data on transfer (Bernhardt, 2005) for a nuanced and interesting picture of upper-level text understanding. Interestingly, grammatical knowledge might have an even higher predictive value within literary text than it has with exposition because the parsimonious nature of literary language pushes the reader into a greater reliance on micro-level features of text and how those features carry meaning. Yet, perhaps most importantly, research indicates that instructors do not have a clear instructional understanding of any of these findings (Zyzik & Polio, 2008) nor do they seem to have a sense for connecting literary reading and speaking about literature. Again, Zyzik & Polio (2008) made a significant contribution as well as Donato & Brooks (2004) in this arena. A final study that all members of a language department should be aware of is Davis, Gorell, Kline, & Hsieh (1992) which focuses on learner attitudes regarding literary reading.

Lest this commentary degenerate into a 20 page literature review, suffice it to say that the entire data base on adults reading in foreign languages should come into play here as it is directly relevant to the project at hand in a language and literature department. Admittedly, that data base does not include an overwhelming number of studies focused on learners reading complicated text beyond literary text. This situation provides the perfect seedbed for supporting a collaborative research effort. Indeed, it is through respect, collaboration and yes, science, rather than politics, that the structural changes called for by the authors of “Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World” can occur and lead both to equity and to better, more sophisticated curricula for learners.

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