



# SLA and the Literature Classroom: Fostering Dialogues



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# Introduction



The title of this volume, *SLA and the Literature Classroom: Fostering Dialogues*, challenges us to establish communication between two groups. The identity of each of these groups, however, is not immediately apparent. The first group, SLA (second language acquisition), is particularly vague because it has come to include researchers who explore how a second language is acquired (both in the field and in the classroom), specialists in foreign language (FL) teaching and learning (K–16), and finally university teaching assistant (TA) supervisors.<sup>1</sup> While our use of the term SLA includes all of these roles, we are particularly concerned with American university professors who teach foreign languages and FL methodology courses and who supervise graduate TAs. With regard to the second group, namely those included in the reference to “the literature classroom,” we consider them to be American university professors of foreign language literature with a wide variety of training, approaches, and fields of research. In most institutions, these two groups operate quite independently and have different responsibilities. Occasionally, literature professors may teach language—in particular, professors at four-year liberal arts colleges. The converse, however, is rarely the case; SLA practitioners do not generally teach literature. So, the two groups, often housed within a single department, operate separately.

The divisions between SLA and literature are not superficial. Rather, they may be as profound as the divisions between colleges of education and programs in the liberal arts, between the natural sciences and the humanities, between those who value applied research and those who honor research in theoretical domains. This division cuts through to how “real intellectualism” is defined: Do real intellectuals wrestle with concrete and practical phenomena? Or do they grapple with abstract and transcendent notions?

At the heart of these debates lies an unspoken belief that, in the academy, the two groups are divided into second-class citizens and the “elite.” The second class citizens, or members of the SLA group, may have clear ideas about what is involved in learning/acquiring and teaching FL; the elite, or the literature group, may wish to preserve their place among their colleagues in disciplines such as English and

Philosophy. While the division between SLA and literature practitioners has many dimensions—ideological (how we think about issues), linguistic (how we talk about issues), and/or curricular (how we conceive of the teaching enterprise), there is no doubt that these two groups are united in their shared commitment to students. As we look for a new professional discourse that will allow us to transcend disciplinary territorialism, we should keep in mind that students in foreign-language departments are, at any level, language learners. Whether in the lower-level classroom or the literature classroom, teachers guide their students in an exploration of how meanings are expressed and communicated through a target language. This common focus on language and language learners is, in our view, where the dialogue must begin.

The title of this volume also indicates that we want to “foster” dialogues, a term that suggests something has been left to languish and requires nurturing. Indeed, in the past, language and literature were not considered separate disciplines. Rather, literature was at the core of the language curriculum and was generally used to teach language (see Schultz, this volume). However, with the advent of the audiolingual method, of the notion of communicative competence, and, more recently, of proficiency-oriented instruction, literature has been increasingly removed from the language-learning enterprise.<sup>2</sup> Practitioners of language and literature have gradually moved into separate camps, each with increasingly distinct ways of articulating their academic endeavors. Many scholars in our field recognize the degree to which this rift can be counterproductive—particularly as it impacts morale, promotion and tenure, distribution of service responsibilities, gender issues, and much more. We believe that only a collaborative approach will help to bridge *a priori* distinctions between practitioners in both fields. That is, there must be an increased focus on how existing SLA research can inform the teaching of literature and, conversely, what literary theory and practice might bring to SLA research. This volume serves, therefore, as a forum for fostering dialogues between practitioners in SLA and in literary studies in order to identify those commonalities that unite us.

Our own experience provides a model that we, the editors of this volume, would like to share. Virginia Scott has taught college-level French for nearly twenty years. Her job description at Vanderbilt University includes directing the first- and second-year French language program, supervising the graduate teaching assistants, teaching the graduate-level FL methods class, and teaching advanced-level French grammar, composition, and conversation classes. Holly Tucker has

taught college-level French for ten years. Her primary area of expertise is seventeenth-century French literature, and she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in her specialization. She also regularly teaches intermediate-level French language, introduction to reading, and graduate-level research and bibliography. Because we are in a relatively small department, our conversations about teaching and learning began soon after Holly joined the Department of French and Italian at Vanderbilt University. However, it was not until Virginia directed the Vanderbilt-in-France program and Holly took over the direction of the language program and TA supervision that our collaboration began.

While directing the study abroad program, Virginia taught a course on twentieth-century literature to advanced-level students of French. Although most of her coursework in graduate school had been in literature, she had rarely taught upper-division literature courses and felt somewhat daunted by the challenge. Wondering if she would measure up to the standards set by her colleagues who regularly teach literature, she asked those colleagues for help in deciding which works to study. Once the theme of the course was decided (the image of the solitary figure in the twentieth-century novel) and the reading list was established (Beauvoir, Camus, Colette, Duras, Gide, Mauriac, Sartre), she felt the work was mostly done. The actual teaching experience, however, was not that simple. Unlike the language course, which is frequently dictated by explicit content (grammar structures, vocabulary units, short readings with guiding questions, culture capsules, current events, etc.), she found that the literature course has little in the way of a prescribed support system for the teacher. She was faced with two embarrassingly simplistic questions: What do teachers of literature actually do during a fifty-minute class period? And, by extension, what should students do? In her recent article (Scott 2001), Virginia describes the essence of her dilemma:

The most important work I did during that semester was trying to answer questions that plague many of us in foreign language and literature departments. Do students have the necessary proficiency in the target language to read and discuss literary texts? How can the literature classroom serve as a place where students' needs for utilitarian relevancy are met? Why do language teachers and literature teachers often feel that they are in different "camps"? And, most importantly, how can the study of literature (re)claim favor (or popularity) among foreign language students (p. 539)?

Ultimately, she returned from the experience wanting to talk to a colleague in literature. How had her experience been typical? The

challenges of the literature classroom were very different from those in the language classroom, and she felt a need to analyze her approach(es) critically.

Meanwhile, with a one-course load reduction, Holly faced her new responsibilities as language coordinator. Syllabi had to be revised and lecturers teaching language courses had to be integrated into the TA groups. During the semester, she met regularly with TAs to develop lesson plans, discuss teaching strategies, explore computer software applications, and write tests. One of the most challenging aspects of her work involved mentoring TAs who were teaching courses that she, herself, was not teaching. And, to add to her already full set of obligations and her research program in literature, she regularly observed classes taught by the TAs; all observations were followed by a post-observation conference and a written report for the student's file.

Although Holly had done course work in SLA theories and foreign language pedagogy while in graduate school, nothing had actually prepared her for the many time-consuming tasks involved in this job. Moreover, she was unprepared for the sense of isolation that often comes with coordinating language courses. While supportive, her colleagues did not seem to recognize the amount of "behind-the-scenes" work that went into the job, nor did they understand how much energy was required to foster the TAs' professional development. She wondered what strategies Virginia used to carry out this kind of responsibility every semester. The challenges of the language supervisor were very different from those she faced as a literature teacher and, like Virginia, she felt a need to analyze her work critically.

The conversations that followed Virginia's return to the department reinforced the mutual respect that had come from "wearing each other's hats." We began to collaborate as teachers in several ways: Holly gave presentations on teaching reading and literature in Virginia's methods class; Virginia gave presentations on empirical research design and bibliographical style in Holly's graduate course on research methods; we discussed the qualities and shortcomings of various texts, including literary texts, for the elementary- and intermediate-level courses; we talked about Holly's use of communicative, small group activities in her literature course on the age of Louis XIV, and Virginia's use of challenging literary texts in the grammar and composition class.

In addition, we collaborated in scholarly ways by reading each other's work and presenting papers jointly at professional meetings. In particular, Holly's interest in the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (hereafter referred to as *Standards*) brought several curricular issues into focus. In her recent article (Tucker 2000), Holly reconsiders the position of literature in the *Standards* and questions whether the new

curriculum promotes the acquisition of interpretative skills necessary for literary exploration or whether it uses literature simply as a “springboard” for something else (linguistic production, historical-cultural lessons). She concludes that much of what makes a literary text “literary” is overlooked in the *Standards* and suggests that this could pose important obstacles in efforts to articulate K-12 foreign-language instruction within higher education.

In all, our conversations about curriculum and about teaching language and literature have deepened our understanding of each other’s work as well as of our own work. This volume represents the culmination of our collaboration to date. Our enthusiasm when sending out the call for articles led us to imagine that our colleagues would be as motivated by the topic as we were, and this was confirmed by the many submissions that we received. Although nearly all of the submissions are from applied linguists—most likely because they are most familiar with this publication—we are convinced that the dialogue has begun. The articles in this volume confirm our sense that we are not talking about dissolving categories. We are interested instead in respecting differences while seeking unity in mission.

We have divided the articles into four categories: renewed debates; colleagues in dialogue; language, literature, and pedagogy; from scholar to teacher. While the themes of each division are different, all the articles echo the same call: literature belongs in the FL curriculum from the elementary through the advanced levels.

We begin the volume with the section called *Renewed Debates* to acknowledge that discussions about the place of literature in the FL curriculum are not new in our profession. In “The Gordian Knot: Language, Literature, and Critical Thinking,” **Jean Marie Schultz** underscores the fact that these debates have a long history. She argues, however, that the renewed attention to literature in the FL curriculum represents a radical shift in approach. Rather than being another phase in an historical cycle of inclusion/exclusion of literature from the language curriculum, she believes that the era of the *Standards* ushers in the possibility of a dynamic new approach to teaching literature. Schultz provides a succinct historical review of the place of literature in the FL curriculum, moving from the “text as cultural artifact” prevalent in grammar-translation period, to the “text with plural meanings and multiple interpretive possibilities” issued by semiotics and reader-response theory. After defining her notion of critical thinking, she describes how FL literature can foster the development of these skills by destabilizing prior knowledge and restructuring experience. In order to illustrate her point, she describes a second-year program that uses short literary texts to teach students how to engage in close readings as

well as to interpret larger cultural issues, thereby developing the kinds of critical thinking skills that are endorsed by the *Standards*.

The second section of this volume, *Colleagues in Dialogue*, reflects the collaborative spirit of this volume in that it includes two articles written jointly by colleagues in SLA and literature. Their dialogues provide models for developing collegial understanding about ideological issues related to literacy as well as models for curricular reform based on a revised understanding of teaching language and literature. In the first article, “Developing Literacy and Literary Competence: Challenges for Foreign language Departments,” **Heidi Byrnes** and **Susanne Kord** engage in a dialogue that challenges philosophical and practical divisions both inside and outside the academy while also describing the curricular revisions at their institution that address these divisions. Byrnes crafts a powerful argument for reform based on the notion that a thorough rethinking of our understanding of the nature of language is required. Rather than continuing to support educational practices that separate language and knowledge, she proposes that pedagogical approaches must reflect an understanding of language as a humanly constructed meaning-making model of reality. This understanding of language as a social semiotic presumes an integration of language and knowledge that can shape a thoroughly new understanding of the nature of language and literacy. To illustrate how these concepts play out in the classroom setting, Kord outlines a course that achieves a symbiosis of content and language instruction—a course in which students are encouraged to evolve beyond communicative goals to achieve nuanced interpretations of literary texts and, by extension, human experiences. Byrnes and Kord weave a convincing argument for curricular reform that integrates language and content at all levels of instruction.

In the second article of this section, “Crossing the Boundaries Between Literature and Pedagogy: Perspectives on a Foreign Language Reading Course,” **Joanne Burnett** and **Leah Fonder-Solano** present a methodical comparison of their beliefs and practices with regard to teaching a third-year introduction to reading and literature course. They review their different educational backgrounds—one in foreign language acquisition and the other in literary study—and describe their different approaches to teaching the same kind of course. In confronting both their similarities and differences, Burnett and Fonder-Solano demonstrate how engaging in dialogue leads to discovery, appreciation, and collegiality. Ultimately, their dialogue provides concrete evidence of the positive results of opening up one’s classroom to a colleague with a different background and approach.

The third section of this volume, called *Language, Literature, and*



*Pedagogy*, includes different theories and approaches to teaching language and literature in an integrated way. The first article, “Rethinking Foreign Language Literature: Towards an Integration of Literature and Language at All Levels” by **Diana Frantzen**, reviews recent research and provides an introductory argument for incorporating literature in the language classroom as well as language in the literature classroom. Frantzen discusses how students can learn to analyze the ways that certain grammar structures are used in literary texts in order to understand how grammatical choices affect meaning. She also argues for developing language skills—particularly reading, speaking, and writing—through the advanced levels of study.

The next three articles in this section propose pedagogical approaches to teaching literature, from the earliest to the more advanced stages of language learning. Much research and scholarship has been devoted to teaching FL, however, comparatively little has been done to address the teaching of literature.<sup>3</sup> That is, the “how to” for teaching literature is often limited to learned strategies (i.e., what our own literature professors did) and to personal preferences (i.e., what works best for us individually). These articles identify pedagogical approaches to the teaching of literature that are founded on a sound understanding of how language is acquired.

In “Reading the Patterns of Literary Works: Strategies and Teaching Techniques,” **Janet Swaffar** presents an approach for teaching literature to beginning students that creates readers equipped with strategies to interpret literature. She endorses top-down processing that teaches students to attend to patterns of textual messages. In her “r+1” approach, students learn to reconstruct macropatterns through a discovery process that explicitly encourages them to try out their own hypotheses. In this discovery process, which involves language exercises that are in textual context, the teacher serves as a guide and not as an expert. Swaffar emphasizes that there are no right answers, just right processes of reading. She shows how students can learn to consider objectively the space between what a text says and what a reader perceives it to say. She argues that using this approach makes novice readers aware of the possible discrepancies between their expectations and the information in a literary text, thereby integrating literary study into language acquisition.

In the next article, “Teaching Literary Texts at the Intermediate Level: A Structured Input Approach,” **Stacey Katz** proposes a model for sensitizing students to the richness of literary texts based on Lee and VanPatten’s (1995) structured input/output approach to teaching FL. She begins by discussing the difficulties and challenges of intermediate-level FL courses. In particular, she notes that the concept of

“bridge courses” may be faulty as it ignores the students who do not pursue language study beyond the intermediate level. Her model, using structured input and output activities, focuses on a communicative approach to teaching literary texts that can enhance the language learning experience for students with different levels of language proficiency and with varied reasons for studying FL. Katz provides examples of her approach by presenting several input and output activities for teaching a poem and a narrative text. She concludes her article by affirming the importance of incorporating student-centered communicative strategies when teaching literary texts. In addition, she challenges the profession to develop these kinds of activities for the benefit of both novice and experienced teachers.

In the last article of this section, “A Stylistic Approach to Foreign-Language Acquisition and Literary Analysis,” **William Berg** and **Laurey K. Martin-Berg** discuss an approach to teaching third-year “bridge” courses. They show that students in a course that focuses on language and culture as well as students in an introductory course on literary analysis can benefit from using a stylistic approach to literary texts to understand both form and content. According to their definition, “style” refers to the choices a speaker or writer makes from among many possible expressions. The “stylistic approach,” by extension, teaches students how to look for and interpret stylistic dimensions of a text. Berg and Martin-Berg illustrate their approach by showing how students can compare two versions of the fairy tale, *Sleeping Beauty* (a seventeenth-century version and a modern version for children), in order to uncover grammatical and semantic differences between the texts. In another example, Berg and Martin-Berg demonstrate that by comparing the first sentence of Flaubert’s short story, *Un Coeur simple*, with a teacher-generated reformulated first sentence, students in an introduction to literary analysis class can learn how to use semantic analyses to gain a deeper understanding of literature.

The final section of this volume, *From Scholar to Teacher*, addresses the important issue of teacher preparation. In many graduate programs, teaching assistants are required to take a methods course in which they review SLA theory and research as it applies to FL teaching. The focus of these courses is generally on developing competence in the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) at the elementary and intermediate levels. While most graduate students will go on to teach literature, they are rarely prepared to do so in an intentional fashion. In response to this problem, **Elizabeth Bernhardt**, in her article “Research into the Teaching of Literature in a Second Language: What it Says and How to Communicate It to Graduate Students,” states that graduate students need to be prepared to teach

language and literature. She argues that in the traditional literature class there is a focus on content rather than a focus on the students; graduate students can be taught to adapt the student-centered approaches typical of the language classroom to the literature classroom. Even more important, she challenges us to be aware that graduate students are often socialized into the “lang-lit split” in the traditional methods course and that we must help them “to see that the acts of language and literature teaching are far more alike than they are different” (p. 191). Finally, Bernhardt’s article provides an excellent conclusion to this volume by proposing that the collaboration between language and literature can begin with a change in approach to training teachers of the future.

We are hopeful that this volume will help inspire further reflection on how FL programs can be viewed, not as the sum of two parts, but rather in terms of a continuum in which all levels of instruction are interconnected. Given the dearth of research models for FL literature in the classroom, the potential for innovation is great. The need is all too pressing.

### Notes

1. In her recent article, “Second Language Acquisition, Applied Linguistics, and the Teaching of Foreign Languages,” Claire Kramsch (2000) describes the confusion that abounds regarding the term “SLA.” She concludes that the term “applied linguistics” is most apt to describe what is typically meant by “SLA” because it includes the varied understandings most often ascribed to this field of inquiry.
2. In his article “W(h)ither Literature? Reaping the Fruit of Language Study Before It’s Too Late,” John McCarthy addresses the problems of removing literature from language learning.
3. In her introduction to *Learning Foreign and Second Languages: Perspectives in Research and Scholarship*, Byrnes (1998) discusses this issue, arguing that FL teachers and applied linguists omitted the literature classroom from their inquiry. Implicit in her argument is the notion that the kinds of pedagogical approaches inspired by the proficiency movement were limited to language acquisition.

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