

AAUSC Issues in Language Program Direction

Advanced Foreign Language Learning: A Challenge to College Programs

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Editors

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Introduction: Creating Sites for Collegiate Advanced Foreign Language Learning

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The work of foreign language supervisors and coordinators can be described from two perspectives: in terms of content, they are to assure quality “language teaching” and language teacher education, including the education of graduate students for teaching; in terms of administration and programmatic reach, they are to assure the smooth functioning of lower-division language instruction within their departments, typically graduate departments at state institutions. Behind that arrangement stands a split in foreign language departments that has, over the years, become nearly invisible: it continues to be the natural order to separate language learning from the content learning that takes place in upper division courses, to separate teaching and teacher preparation from the center of an undergraduate and even a graduate department’s intellectual work, and to separate the educational and research interests and the individual and communal forms of engagement of an entire department and its faculty members from the language acquisitional interests of students, undergraduate and graduate. The many advances in program quality supervisors and coordinators have achieved over roughly the past decade were accomplished within those intellectual and structural boundaries. The guiding presumption or, at times, the reluctantly reached conclusion was that the bifurcations on which this arrangement rests were sufficiently acceptable and, given admirable commitment and clear-eyed professionalism on the part of these faculty members, reasonably workable within the dominant institutional and intellectual environment.

However, for some time now alert practitioners have also addressed the fact that the intellectual foundations of the existing content and administrative-organizational arrangements deserved to be questioned, from the standpoint of the nature of language, from the perspective of adult language learning in a collegiate context, and with regard to the nature of collegiate language teaching. Within this book series, such questioning first gained clear voice in the 1995 AAUSC volume, edited by Claire Kramsch (1995), *Redefining the Boundaries of Language Study*. At the time, editor and authors explored the possibility of expanding theoretical, educational, linguistic, cultural, and language learning boundaries. The aim was to examine not only what was visible and overtly shaped instructed language learning but also what remained invisible, yet strongly privileged certain praxes for all members of an educational

context, learners in classrooms, established and apprenticing teachers, and supervisors and coordinators.

As we conceptualized the present volume, we returned to that questioning mode and extended it in two directions. First, our intention was not merely to re-vision the content of what supervisors do within the existing structures of two-year language programs but of expanding their purview to encompass the typical four-year span of undergraduate programs and, given their role in graduate education, to graduate programs as well. That context should then create the possibility for imagining new foreign language educational opportunities, the second intention of the volume. Specifically, our goal was to enable focused attention on an area of language learning that supervisors and coordinators have generally considered outside their purview and their expertise, though societal and academic interests in such learning has grown exponentially over the last few years: the goal of enabling adult collegiate learners to attain levels of ability in a second or third language that would readily be considered “advanced,” even though the precise meaning of such a designation would await further specification. Taken together, these two moves mean that the volume extends the necessary intellectual work in two areas, in terms of a new educational site and also in terms of a new educational vision.

Though we knew that shift to be ambitious, we were confident of its overall viability and necessity. As we present the collection of papers, that conviction remains with us, though we are more keenly aware now than at the time of the volume’s conceptualization of the considerable difficulties supervisors and coordinators can and, indeed, are likely to experience as they attend to imagining and creating an encompassing undergraduate program that would lead to advanced L2 abilities. To put this observation into perspective, one should, of course, not be surprised that a price is being paid by some for the privileges experienced by others within split foreign language departments that have upheld the goal of competent, advanced language abilities in a second language more as an ideal rather than a reality that obligated them to certain praxes. At present that toll is exerted primarily from language program supervisors and coordinators, a phenomenon that is well known in the context of their daily work.

But our experience as editors now sees repercussions of the phenomenon as well in the broader context of the horizons of imagination and possible sites of action that supervisors feel free to claim for themselves. Furthermore, because their conduct makes up their scholarly and professional identities and thus the contributions they can make to the field, a significant toll is also being taken from the entire field of the study of foreign languages, literatures, and cultures. Sadly, that realization has yet to affect the agenda of the relevant professional organizations, from the American Association of Applied Linguistics to the diverse language-specific AATs to the Modern Language Association as the largest professional organization in the humanities in higher education, nor has it garnered much support from the appropriate administrative units and leaders in institutions of higher education. Happily,

the contributors to the volume sustained the merits of our initial assumption: namely that it is the professional group of the supervisors and coordinators and those who have strong affinities to their concerns, including graduate students, that is able to make important contributions to the issues, obstacles notwithstanding. They have begun to espouse as educationally desirable and viable a focus on the advanced learner and, with that vision, have begun to create curricular and pedagogical models that would enact and sustain such a focus.

Taken as a group, the contributions have identified and articulated a need for whole program thinking that overcomes the existing structural and content bifurcation in order to develop a foreign-language based intellectual and educational presence for foreign language departments, internally and externally. They do so by exploring what advanced instructed learning at the college level might look like if one were to expand the frame of reference and decision-making to a foreign language department's entire undergraduate program, not just its "language program." This is new territory for many reasons, but one that seems to stand out for its implications for the field. After close to two decades of considerable efforts within the profession toward enabling advanced L2 learning within the proficiency framework and also through adding new content areas, attaining that goal generally eludes foreign language departments. That is, of course, a concern in itself. However, because L2 advanced learning is inherently associated with intellectually meritorious work, the continued inability of language departments to graduate advanced L2 users all too easily translates into strange perceptions: to many observers they seem less able to assert an intellectual presence in the academy now that they have devoted considerable professional energies to communicative language teaching for the many than they seemed to be able to do when they were the literature department for the few.

Viewed in that light, the chapters implicitly broach the difficult question whether the prevailing construct for language acquisition, namely communicative language teaching, itself creates a glass ceiling that makes it difficult both for learners and teachers to develop the kinds of second-language capacities that we generally associate with language use in a range of public settings, in the conduct of civic and political and economic life, in research and public policies, or in the creation of cultural products that are heavily language-dependent (e.g., the printed work in literary and non-literary texts, the media), all areas of language use that we associate with advanced capacities. Some contributions answer it by remaining well within the framework that has, until now, been the most useful for imagining advanced levels of ability, namely a framework derived from the ACTFL Proficiency construct. Because others explicitly or implicitly go beyond its major concepts and programmatic and pedagogical recommendations, readers are invited to consider whether explorations of that kind might better enable programs and teachers to work efficiently and effectively toward the desired goal of advanced levels of L2 ability. Taken together, however, all papers conceptualize content learning as explicitly linked to language and, by extension, to phenomena of adult

instructed language acquisition for different learner groups and learning goals. In so doing they bring to the task expertise for addressing programmatic issues that span undergraduate and graduate education, thus helping to re-shape the intellectual discussion of a department from that perspective.

Of course, such proposals uncover as many dilemmas as they offer answers regarding the programmatic consequences, in terms of structures, courses, materials, and pedagogies, that coordinating content and language learning throughout extended programmatic contexts and toward advanced levels of competence might present to foreign language departments. But even at this early stage of deliberations they suggest to departments ways of responding to the insistent demands that are being made of them in a globalized environment, in multicultural societies, and in the academy, demands for highly competent users of multiple languages, even within the boundaries of the typical undergraduate program, and even with the considerable challenges those expectations pose for non-cognate languages or the less commonly taught languages.

We have arranged the volume's contributions in three parts. Part One, "Literacy As a Conceptual Framework for Collegiate Advanced Learning," comprises three chapters that explicitly propose the construct of literacy as a way of expanding the vision and site as well as the programmatic and pedagogical conduct of foreign language departments. Opening this group of papers is Richard Kern's article, "Literacy and Advanced Foreign Language Learning: Rethinking the Curriculum." A continuation of earlier book-length considerations in which he proposed that literacy provides a highly favorable context for much-needed curricular rethinking, his reflections, not insignificantly for this volume, occurred as he directed his university's study abroad program in France. While this context is typically seen as achieving what programs at home don't seem to be able to accomplish, Kern rightly cautions us in that belief: unless we engage in a renewed and invigorated attention to written communication throughout the curriculum, neither study at home nor study abroad will lead to the desired learning outcomes. He pursues this line of thinking by first focusing on the nature of literacy, understood not in terms of fixed constructs akin to the prescriptivism of schools of rhetoric nor as an abandonment of a communicative focus. Instead, literacy focuses on "relationships between readers, writers, texts, culture, and language learning" and is inherently variable and multiple. After expanding on this notion he offers a framework for curricular design that can enhance the development of such forms of literacy by guiding departments and individual instructors through the all-important decisions they will need to make, about the content they might choose to teach, the methodological approach that might facilitate its teaching and, finally, the goals it would support. Referring to the literacy-oriented work of the New London Group and applying its findings and recommendations to teaching methodology, he exemplifies what such an approach might mean on the ground through the central activity of storytelling and through literacy-based projects.

Janet Swaffar's chapter, "A Template for Advanced Learner Tasks: Staging Genre Reading and Cultural Literacy Through the Précis," offers an expansive treatment of a genre that is perhaps better known to literary scholars than it is to language specialists, the précis. In focusing on the précis, she argues persuasively not only for the need to understand language acquisition, particularly more advanced forms of language acquisition, in terms of acquiring sophisticated discursive practices, in the interpretation and production of a variety of textual genres. More important, she presents a rich tapestry of applications for the proposal that the précis can provide a template that teachers and students can use in order to learn to identify the messages, obligatory textual moves, and language features that characterize various genres. This she accomplishes with reference to both fictional and non-fictional genres that are thematically related to the novel *Like Water for Chocolate* and by using, for a range of genres, the fundamental distinctions between formal and informal, private and public discourses and the sender/receiver relationship. In this fashion, she vividly brings to the fore the major characteristics of such genres as the novel, the film, the encyclopedia article, the movie review, and the interview with the artist, in each case comparatively pointing out the features of these respective genres and the interpretive opportunities and the inferential challenges they present to all readers, but particularly to non-native readers. Not only does such a treatment of the précis offer to teachers a finely honed tool for developing students' language ability, wherever learners currently are; it fosters the kind of multi-perspectival, yet textually based approaches that are at the heart of deepened textual understanding and, ultimately, cultural literacy, both characteristics of the advanced language user.

The final chapter with an explicit literacy focus, contributed by Heidi Byrnes and Katherine Sprang and entitled "Fostering Advanced L2 Literacy: A Genre-Based Cognitive Approach," also highlights the potential of a genre approach for curricula and pedagogies that desire to foster advanced L2 capacities. It does so by further specifying the motivation for recommending genre as a construct, inasmuch as such an approach recognizes the short comings of both a form-focused pedagogy (even of much of communicative language teaching) and also of content-based instruction which tends to offer few principles for curricular and pedagogical decision-making that can be sustained over an entire college-level program and that specifically target advanced competencies. Linking genre with a cognitive approach to teaching and learning via genre-based tasks, the chapter provides a close-up look at how one might then enable learners to make the kinds of narrative choices that characterize early advanced learning. Choice is a key component as well in the discussion of learners who are well situated at the advanced level. Located within a treatment of the political speech genre, the authors show that a key characteristic and a key cognitive and linguistic choice for these learners is between two major semiotic perspectives, a congruent and/or synoptic form of semiosis. The chapter concludes with a framework for imagining the lengthy progression toward high levels of competence in instructed

learning that the authors call “continua of multiple literacies.” Expressed in terms of content, speaker-audience relationships, and features of textuality, it has the potential for supporting both curricular and pedagogical decision-making throughout the undergraduate curriculum and, indeed, well into graduate study.

Part Two, “Heritage Learners as Advanced Learners,” focuses on a topic that readily comes to mind when one thinks of both the need and the potential for advanced levels of second language acquisition: the heritage learner. Not surprisingly, closer inspection reveals that matters are far from simple here as well. Daniel Villa begins with a consideration of “Heritage Language Speakers and Upper-Division Language Instruction: Findings from a Spanish Linguistics Program.” Among many other points, he makes clear that “the heritage speaker” is hardly a uniform and univalent person, therefore really does not exist, and that even those programs that have a strong desire to integrate such speakers into their offerings are considerably challenged by the educational, curricular, and pedagogical decisions they face. Villa demonstrates the specifics of such a challenge in the context of an upper-division Spanish linguistics program that includes both heritage speakers and non-heritage speakers. By using a learner-centered approach that is inspired by Freirean pedagogical principles, the program is able to be both respectful of the rural working class varieties of Spanish spoken by the students and, by implication, of the students themselves, and also able to connect the reality of the students’ sociocultural and linguistic environment to the scientific study of language. The result is an approach to language learning and to linguistics that might well serve as a model not only at institutions with significant heritage learner enrollments but elsewhere.

A concern with all-too-easy reference to “the heritage learner” also informs the chapter by Olga Kagan and Kathleen Dillon, whose focus is on the Russian heritage speaker but whose insights should be able to guide other heritage programs as well. Entitled “Heritage Speakers’ Potential for High-Level Language Proficiency”, Kagan and Dillon’s article first provides a more nuanced description of heritage learners that takes into account a range of characteristics, including heritage language ability, English language ability, length of residence in the heritage-speaking community, and amount of schooling in the heritage language. The authors then outline the curriculum for the undergraduate Russian program at UCLA as a model for fostering advanced language abilities among heritage learners. Recognizing that the development of advancedness among collegiate L2 learners is a long-term process that requires a multi-year departmental commitment, Kagan and Dillon describe the sequence of courses that have been implemented to facilitate the language abilities of a diverse group of heritage learners. More than just a series of courses, the curriculum they present also includes heritage learner-specific materials, instructors trained in heritage language acquisition, and outreach to the heritage language community. They also demonstrate how

this curriculum accommodates non-heritage learners and thus allows for the integration of all undergraduate learners of Russian.

Contributions in Part Three, “Contexts for Advanced Learning,” are but a sample of the many contexts in which one can imagine advanced learning to take place, even with the stricture of instructed learning as contrasted with naturalistic learning. Casilde Isabelli’s chapter, entitled “Study Abroad for Advanced Foreign Language Majors: Optimal Duration for Developing Complex Structures,” opens the part with the context that is probably most readily associated with the promise of advanced learning, study abroad. Isabelli acknowledges the intuitive appeal of and the growing interest in study abroad, but she points out that little research has been conducted on the effect that length of stay has on language learning, in general, and the development of advanced language abilities, more specifically. She therefore examines the degree to which collegiate students learn one syntactic structure that is representative of advanced language abilities in Spanish, the null subject parameter, at different stages of study abroad. Framed within a UG-based approach to language acquisition, Isabelli’s empirical research study measured participants’ use and understanding of the null subject parameter on grammaticality judgment tests and in oral narratives after one month, four months, and nine months of study abroad. Her findings that participants made the greatest gains on the two assessment tools after nine months of study have implications for foreign language departments as they consider how best to integrate study abroad into the undergraduate curriculum. To that end, Isabelli concludes with recommendations for increasing the articulation between study abroad programs and the home department in order to facilitate the continued development of advanced language abilities.

In the next article “‘What’s Business Got To Do with It?’ The Unexplored Potential of Business Language Courses for Advanced Foreign Language Learning” Astrid Weigert presents the context of business language courses as an overlooked yet fertile ground for developing advanced language abilities. Typically existing on the margins of foreign language departments or seen primarily as a boon to class enrollment figures, language for specific purposes programs have largely been viewed as serving students’ pre-professional needs and therefore contributing only peripherally to students’ overall language competence and intellectual advancement. Weigert, however, argues that such programs can and should belong in the mainstream of departmental culture and exemplifies her position by describing the revision of a German business language course to comply with the literacy and discourse orientation that marks the rest of the undergraduate curriculum. Seeing business language courses as much more than the traditional acquisition of technical vocabulary, she demonstrates how, through the explicit attention to genre, students are able to learn not only the vocabulary specific to a particular business-related topic, but also the discourse-level behaviors typical for that genre in a business context, thereby contributing to their evolving L2 literacy. In so doing, she admonishes the SLA community, business language instructors, and FL

departments to seek a broader framework when conceptualizing advanced language learning so that business language programs can become an integral part of the undergraduate curriculum and contribute more effectively to the development of advanced language abilities.

Completing this part is a chapter that refers to a context for foreign language learning and a learner group that, we dare say, is probably an unlikely mention when one speaks of fostering advanced language capacities within the context of undergraduate education and with an audience of language supervisors and coordinators. And yet, as we trust readers will agree, the language abilities of non-native graduate students are of central concern to graduate programs, to undergraduate education, and to the future of the foreign language profession. What makes this contribution all the more appealing is that it offers the perspective of writers who are themselves still graduate students rather than presenting the observations of faculty, administrators, or policy makers. In their paper “Fostering Advanced-Level Language Abilities in Foreign Language Graduate Programs: Application of Genre Theory” Cori Crane, Olga Liamkina, and Marianna Ryshina-Pankova take a two-pronged approach. In the first half of the paper they report on a survey they conducted in which they solicited input from peers in graduate programs across the country regarding their perceived needs for advancing their own language abilities. The responses received were both unsurprising and troubling when one considers the profession’s inattentiveness to this important aspect of the development of its future colleagues. But the writers took these data and used them for further analysis, to explore the mental and discursive worlds that these graduate student respondents had created over the many years of their language study as to what constitutes and what leads to advanced L2 abilities.

On that basis, they observe that graduate students do not in general have suitable frameworks for understanding, at the necessary level of specificity, just what constitutes advanced-level language use and, by extension, advanced-level language learning. The significance of that finding is obvious when one recalls that both areas are well-known sites for considerable anxiety among non-native speakers. The authors conclude that only when graduate students have been given the opportunity, in both their undergraduate teaching experience and in their graduate education, to develop a more sophisticated understanding of advanced abilities in terms of domain-specific (and that is genre-specific) features, will they be able to encourage their departments to support them in their own language development or, absent such support, work on their own to enhance their abilities successfully.

The volume concludes with a post-script by Hiram Maxim “Expanding Visions for Collegiate Advanced Foreign Language Learning” in which he examines the prevailing departmental, professional, and research practices in collegiate foreign language learning and argues that they needlessly limit the opportunities for developing advanced language abilities. Particularly problematic for an expanded conceptualization of advanced language learning is the current privileging of spoken language use, naturalistic learning, and a

decontextualized notion of learner-centeredness that is not always consistent with the intellectual goals of higher education. In response, he draws on the insights of the preceding chapters, particularly the arguments for a literacy and discourse orientation to advancedness, to propose alternative approaches to envisioning advanced-level competence that reflect a social understanding of language use. Maxim admits the significant challenges to rethinking some of these issues that are central to collegiate foreign language learning, but he also sees such re-visioning as necessary if collegiate foreign language learning is to remain an integral part of an undergraduate humanistic education.

With its focus on new conceptual frameworks for collegiate advanced language learning, the challenges of addressing the advanced language needs of heritage learners, and different contexts for fostering advanced language use, we hope this volume contributes to and expands the nascent discussion on advanced language learning in the profession, and, in particular, provides food for thought to language coordinators and supervisors about new directions for collegiate foreign language learning. As the following chapters indicate, advanced language learning is a pan-departmental challenge that, when viewed as integral to and inseparable from collegiate foreign language learning, has the potential to greatly enrich foreign language education.