Development and Supervision of Teaching Assistants in Foreign Languages

Joel C. Walz
Editor

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AAUSC
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Introduction

In the ebb and flow of concerns expressed by professionals involved in higher education, teaching seems to have moved to the forefront. While few universities and surprisingly few colleges have abandoned their commitment to research, it does appear that interest in providing high-quality instruction for undergraduates is reaching a new peak. We can see this changed attitude in the numerous seminars and programs at many colleges and universities, where faculty and administrators are exploring new avenues for improving undergraduate instruction without reducing research. We can see it in articles and editorials in professional publications such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and, in foreign languages, in dramatically increasing attendance at professional meetings, such as those of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, of regional conferences on language teaching, and of state associations.

The American Association of University Supervisors, Coordinators, and Directors of Foreign Language Programs (AAUSC), which produces this volume every year, is ultimately concerned with quality in teaching. Statistics continue to show that the vast majority of students learning foreign languages in America's universities are at the first- or second-year level. We know from experience that these courses are the domain of graduate student teaching assistants (TAs) in virtually all universities. When we add in classes taught by temporary and part-time faculty (lecturers, instructors, adjunct faculty), we must recognize that a substantial portion, perhaps even most, of America's efforts at educating its population in foreign languages at the postsecondary level is in the hands of teachers under the direct supervision of members of the AAUSC and their colleagues.

While the AAUSC has as one of its primary goals the encouragement and publication of research in the fields most related to our work (this

volume being an example), we also spend considerable energy in the development and supervision of competent teachers. On the one hand, we have distinct advantages over our colleagues in schools of education, who must train schoolteachers via one or two methods courses and an eight- to ten-week teaching practicum. We supervise many of our teachers for a number of years. We have developed a variety of training aids, including preservice orientation sessions, many types of methods courses (several of which are described in this volume), in-service training seminars, and direct observation of novice teachers by veteran colleagues for a long period of time. Our TAs have many advantages over undergraduates who go directly into full-time teaching because of their extended coursework, increased opportunities for study in the target culture, contact with professors who serve as mentors, and supervision by a professional TA program director.

Yet no one has ever established that teaching at the university level is better, or produces better results, than teaching of any other type. Clearly, much remains to be done. The AAUSC is in a unique position to capitalize on the renewed interest in teaching in general and foreign language teaching in particular. The current volume, *Development and Supervision of Teaching Assistants in Foreign Languages,* the third in the series *AAUSC Issues in Language Program Direction,* produced by the AAUSC and published by Heinle & Heinle Publishers, presents a broad spectrum of articles that demonstrate how complex the development of successful teachers can be. The volume title reflects that complexity.

"Development" is a term that has replaced "training" in that the latter implies mechanical procedures and rote learning. Authors of this volume have interpreted development in a very broad sense, with many components and approaches. "Supervision" (literally, "to see over") is both an aspect of development and the format in which all development takes place.

We begin the volume with three articles that describe entire programs, thereby showing not only the diversity of approaches that long-range supervision entails, but also how such programs evolve given changing needs and the creation of new ideas. The second group of two articles describes radically different ways of defining the methods course. No longer a collection of "how-to" suggestions (in fact, it has not been for a long time), the new-generation methods course is based on research and immediate concerns of higher education. The last group of six articles discusses specific approaches to take in the supervision of TAs in their role as teachers and as professionals.

In the first article, "Undergraduate Teaching Assistants: One Model," Katherine Kulick suggests preparing undergraduates to assume the duties of TAs in colleges where the faculty teach all beginning courses. She emphasizes changes that have occurred in teaching theory since Rassias pioneered the model with an audiolingual approach. Benefits accrue to faculty, who have no increased teaching loads, to students, who have more contact time with the language, and to TAs, who develop responsibility and teaching skills.

Julia Herschensohn stresses change in her chapter, "Teaching Assistant Development: A Case Study," which she traces to an increased emphasis on excellence in teaching at her institution. She describes each aspect of the development program in French and how different offices involved with teaching at the university can be integrated into a coherent whole.

The less commonly taught languages have not participated equally in the methodological changes of recent years. Because TAs in Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Russian in particular do not receive the same education in language teaching as do their counterparts in French, German, and Spanish, we are not developing new TA program directors who can educate future TAs. Benjamin Rifkin, in "Breaking Out of the Vicious Circle: TA Training, Education, and Supervision for the Less Commonly Taught Languages," pleas for a break in this cycle and describes detailed steps that faculty members in these languages can take to improve TA training and to develop better materials for these languages.

Narrowing their focus to the methods course, Marva Barnett and Robert Francis Cook, in "The Seamless Web: Developing Teaching Assistants as Professionals," see no dichotomy between research and teaching. In their chapter they describe the methods course that they teach as a team, in which they integrate such seemingly diverse topics as teaching theory, research methods, bibliographical style, and ethics. All aspects contribute to the professional competence of future faculty members.

Another long-range approach to TA development is that of Keith Mason, described in "Beyond the Methods Course: Designing a Graduate Seminar in Foreign Language Program Direction." Taking his cue from evidence that many TA supervisors have their work thrust upon them with little preparation of their own, he describes a seminar he has given that will prepare future TA supervisors. He combines readings in language learning theory with a hands-on approach of observations and role-plays to prepare TAs for frequently offered positions in this field.

In the group of articles on specific aspects of TA development, Charles James introduces a set of five "tools" that he has found useful in supervising TAs in "What TAs Need to Know to Teach According to the New Paradigm." Among them is the Triangle showing the relationship between the learner and the language course, the keystone being the topic discussed and not the language itself. He applies Knop's Overview-Prime-Drill-Check method to communicative teaching and emphasizes small-group work as an effective way to achieve the goals of current theories of foreign language learning.

In "'Poof! You're a Teacher!': Using Introspective Data in the Professional Development of Beginning TAs," Mary Wildner-Bassett recommends the use of dialogue journals written by TAs to enhance their awareness in four areas: professional development as an ongoing process, teacher and learner roles in the classroom, anxiety and ways to reduce it, and learner styles. She quotes many insightful remarks made by TAs to show that they can assume much of the responsibility for their own development.

In the first of two linguistic approaches to TA supervision, Nadine O'Connor Di Vito, in "Sensitizing Teaching Assistants to Native-Speaker Norms in the Communicative Classroom," identifies a lack of knowledge about how native speakers use linguistic forms to communicate in true contexts. Using examples from French, she shows how traditional classroom and textbook descriptions do not accurately reflect native speech. She recommends a greater use of authentic oral documents and sensitizing TAs to such differences.

In "Toward a Revised Model of TA Training," Cynthia Fox shows how TAs need to have a knowledge about their target language that only linguistics can provide. Realizing that additional required coursework is unlikely in most departments, she argues for the integration of techniques such as language awareness activities into existing methods courses so that TAs will be prepared to discuss features of the target language in an accurate way.

Another important aspect of TA training is sensitivity to cultural differences, as explained by Madeleine Cottenet-Hage, John Joseph, and Pierre Verdaguer in "Thinking Culturally: Self-Awareness and Respect for Diversity in the Foreign Language Classroom." They describe how to "think culturally" and how to train TAs to use the classroom as a laboratory for the discovery of "small-c" culture.

We conclude this volume with a discussion of testing foreign language proficiency. Robert Terry describes two ways of scoring students' written and oral production in "Improving Inter-rater Reliability in Scoring Tests in Multisection Courses." He describes both global and analytic systems, offering a number of detailed scales created by himself and other scholars. He also recommends specific training procedures designed to help TAs become more consistent in scoring their students' tests in multisection courses.

The grouping of these chapters and the definitions given above do not imply that development and supervision are distinct entities nor that one is philosophical and the other mechanical. One cannot exist without the other. Development is a long-range goal; we attempt to achieve it through complex, multifaceted programs comprising many different procedures, techniques, and guiding principles and by supervising the entire process. The membership of the AAUSC hopes that the depth and breadth of the 11 articles presented in this volume will contribute to an understanding of the scope of the problems we face and provide solutions.

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