

# ***Challenges in the 1990s for College Foreign Language Programs***

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# The Graduate Teaching Assistant in an Age of Standards

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The teaching profession in the United States is moving rapidly to satisfy public demands for accountability. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, a Carnegie Commission creation, hopes to issue a national license to qualified teachers in all major disciplines by the end of this century. The AATF has produced the first-ever statement of knowledge and skills required by beginning and advanced teachers of French (Murphy & Goepper, 1989). AATSP and ACTFL have identified general competencies for foreign language teaching. While the thrust of these movements is directed toward the improvement of secondary education, the standards themselves need not be limited to any particular level of the educational system. The knowledge and skills identified in these documents are vital curricular concerns for the entire educational community. One might even argue that the larger the educational system, the greater the professional development needs based on these statements.

Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) play a crucial and highly problematic role in the basic language programs of American universities. As Allen and Reuter (1990, p. 5) claim, they are "a vital part of the academic life of the departments and universities employing them," both as graduate students and teachers of undergraduates. Their dual role as teacher and student has contributed to an ambivalent self-identity.

Although teaching assistantships “arose out of a need to attract capable students to graduate school” (p. 2), their existence at some universities today stems in large part from the pragmatic need to service large numbers of undergraduate students in core classes.

If it appears ambitious or even counter-productive to speak of higher standards in an era of teacher shortages, it is even more daunting to argue for professionalism in a corps of novices, whose appointment rests primarily upon the survival needs of an understaffed system of higher education. Traditionally, both departments and individual GTAs have adopted a “make the best of it” attitude in the discharge of their responsibilities. The underlying premise of this article is that such an attitude must be replaced by a commitment to the competencies outlined in the national standards now emerging. Failure to act upon this commitment will only widen the gap between new knowledge in the disciplines and the incorporation of that knowledge into a revitalized undergraduate curriculum. Such a lag in competency will doom institutions to a progressively inferior quality of instruction. The remainder of this article will highlight the most critical competencies in foreign language teaching and include specific suggestions for improvements in GTA training.

## **Proficiency Needs**

Good language teaching rests on the bedrock of language proficiency. AATF posits as minimal for the beginning teacher the ACTFL Advanced level in speaking and writing and Advanced High for listening and reading (Murphy & Goepper, 1989, p. 11). Moreover, it is expected that exiting GTAs will have achieved Advanced High proficiency in the active skills as well. While Magnan (1986) reported median proficiency levels of fourth-year undergraduate majors at the University of Wisconsin as Advanced, all students in the group had spent time abroad. Moreover, 40% of the students scored below the Advanced level. Her findings roughly corroborate the 1967 Carroll study of language majors, which found an average proficiency rating of 2 to 2+ on the FSI scale (ACTFL’s Advanced to Advanced High). She noted slightly lower levels for teaching majors in a report by Manley of the Texas Project, where 67% of 500 volunteer teacher candidates scored at the Intermediate High level or better. However, it is not possible to generalize from these limited data to other university programs, where experience seems to indicate the existence of numerous entering GTAs having proficiency levels below Advanced. In the face of such bleak reality, one is tempted to despair of attaining the desired level and to lower standards accordingly.

A more rational and courageous response would consist of looking squarely at the standards and *building competency-developing opportunities into every aspect of the graduate program*. Let us consider, for example, the all-important speaking skill. Advanced speakers (on the ACTFL scale) should be able to function in everyday situations and satisfy routine school and work requirements. They should also be able to “narrate and describe with paragraph-length connected discourse (ACTFL, 1986, p. 1).” It is clear that graduate classes taught in the target language (TL) will inevitably give students practice with the house-keeping and discussion vocabulary needed, incidentally, for lower-level instruction. Graduate faculty fully aware of student needs to “narrate and describe” can easily provide opportunities for such practice in almost any literature or civilization course.

Similarly, the Advanced writer can “join sentences in simple discourse of at least several paragraphs in length on familiar topics (p. 5).” The academic content of every graduate course taught permits and in fact cries out for such functional activity. The Advanced skill of being able to express oneself “with some circumlocution” warrants a certain tolerance of experimentation in graduate writing. However, one formidable obstacle stands in the way—traditionally, graduate research papers (the principal form of GTA writing) are treated as “finished products” rather than as key activities in a *process approach* to writing. Writing-across-the-curriculum has unfortunately not yet reached the celestial heights of graduate education. In foreign language departments, at least, there is little evidence that graduate faculty are being trained in process-writing and many are not even aware of the different types of writing which form the basis of the skill. Expressive writing, for example, plays virtually no role in most graduate programs. At least the literature in foreign language education contains no reference to this type of innovation in faculty development programs.

The Advanced High listener is able “to understand the main ideas of most speech in standard dialect” and “shows an emerging awareness of culturally implied meanings beyond the surface of the text (p. 3).” At first blush, it might seem almost axiomatic that consistent use of the TL in graduate classes would result in significant development of the listening skill. Research does not indicate such automatic skill transfer without *active responses* tied to the identification of main ideas and some overt recognition of the cultural information.

The Advanced High reader is in fact able “to follow essential points of written discourse at the Superior level in areas of special interest or knowledge (p. 4).” Thus, GTAs ought to be “Superior” readers in working with their course materials. This implies coping with exposi-

tory prose on unfamiliar topics (albeit within the student's range of academic interests) and reading a variety of literary texts "with almost complete comprehension and at normal speed." It includes the systematic use of extralinguistic knowledge and an awareness of aesthetic properties and literary styles. Above all, perhaps, it means *interacting with cultural texts* and the systematic use of *inferencing skill*. Presently graduate faculty *assume* that students possess the preceding skills, a presupposition not always corroborated by experience.

Much current graduate study in the foreign language involves some skill practice directly related to the development of second-language proficiency. Optimizing this transfer of competency from graduate coursework to improved proficiency will depend in large measure upon more careful and *conscious planning* of graduate programs of study. Specifically, it will result only from the inclusion of GTA proficiency needs in the requirements of the program and in the curricula of individual courses. Unless these needs become the focus of attention in all discussions of program revision, little additional benefit can be derived. The following suggestions are offered to departments serious about the improvement of GTA proficiency levels toward meeting AATF Basic and, eventually, Superior standards:

- 1) The department chairperson has ultimate responsibility for efforts to incorporate proficiency-oriented activities into the graduate program. He or she must insist that all graduate courses be taught in the TL (the only exceptions being for non-language-specific methods and linguistics courses). Also, it is his or her responsibility to insure that the department has a corps of trained oral proficiency testers available.

- 2) Graduate faculty must be educated about (or reminded of) the nature of proficiency. *Specific departmental activity* is needed to generate interest in the topic of proficiency at the graduate level. This could be realized simply with informal discussions (even brown-bag lunches) during which faculty share ideas on how to help GTAs become more proficient in the language.

- 3) Where departmental graduate curriculum committees exist, they should place proficiency high on their agenda. For example, they too should mandate the exclusive use of the TL in departmental graduate courses.

- 4) Individual faculty should be *required* to demonstrate efforts to incorporate proficiency principles into their graduate teaching. At a minimum, this would entail creating a learning environment character-

ized by two-way communication in the TL. Moreover, such efforts should become part of the faculty evaluation process.

5) GTA evaluations should occur *periodically* throughout the program and proficiency checks should be an important part of those evaluations. Such reviews could take the form of an administered oral proficiency test, but they should include an evaluation of the GTA's proficiency in all skills based on performance in coursework. Evaluation decisions should focus more on demonstrated skills than on formal grades, which do not always correlate well with specific language competencies.

GTAs will routinely reach the recommended AATF proficiency levels only if graduate program administrators and faculty make a concerted effort to ensure that proficiency is a natural outcome of program requirements.

## Culture

In the three-year deliberations of the AATF Commission on Professional Standards, culture proved to be the thorniest problem, the most elusive area of competence. Perhaps because its domain is so vast, consensus required much "give-and-take." That consensus "is based on the concept of culture as an organic whole made up of values, a grid through which one sees the world, habits of thought and feeling, and habits of interacting with certain social institutions and customs" (Nostrand, 1989, p. 14). The Commission identified three interrelated strands: sociolinguistic ability, certain areas of knowledge, and certain informed attitudes. Seelye's (1987) seven categories of cultural objectives provide another framework of needs for the professional foreign language teacher.

Analysis of the preceding two sources suggests an overwhelming educational task. What then can be reasonably expected of a fledgling GTA and how can this minimal expertise be ensured?

Clearly a selection of cultural priorities is in order. It matters less that one agrees with the following list than that each graduate program formulate a clear set of cultural goals based on national standards. The following are offered as a starting point for the discussion of cultural competencies needed by GTAs.



### **Sociolinguistic Ability**

For use in their current teaching and in their future careers, GTAs:

1) *Should be able to meet all the demands for survival as a traveler.* For the GTA, this means especially knowing how to explain, amplify, illustrate, and apply the survival information found in textbooks used in undergraduate instruction.

2) *Should be able to explain terms commonly used in culturally related texts.* For the GTA, the terms should be rooted in, although not limited to, the content of undergraduate teaching materials. Graduate faculty should be aware of these terms and incorporate them into graduate coursework as appropriate occasions present themselves.

3) *Should be able to use appropriate language in common social situations.* Graduate faculty can help GTAs to appreciate cultural diversity by sharing their own experiences in "getting along" in the target culture and by discussing cultural settings, social organizations, and behavior rules (communicative competence). They themselves should be aware of "deep culture" and present, whenever possible, organizing principles that underlie surface facts. They should also incorporate standard (prestige) and regional forms of speech in their lessons. In brief, they need to become exemplars for teaching culture.

### **Knowledge**

The well-prepared GTA:

1) *Can interpret most common authentic documents, schedules, maps, etc.* Enlightened graduate faculty can lead the way by incorporating realia into their own courses whenever possible.

2) *Knows the main historical periods of the country(ies) whose culture is (are) being taught.* Graduate faculty can help by putting literary events into an historical and social framework. Can discuss the educational system, politics, and social structure of the country(ies) in question.

3) *Knows the main geographical features of the country(ies) in question.*

4) *Can say how a country's institutions and customs regulate behavior, both of natives and of foreign travelers.*

Graduate faculty can help GTAs acquire pertinent cultural knowledge in a variety of ways. First, through their own teaching practice, they can demonstrate an awareness of the value of *authentic materials* as organizers of learning. They should encourage cultural dialogue in the use of such materials. They can insist on TL protocol (e.g., the use of TL in



class instructions, in communication, and in framing thoughts). Semiotic components can be added to language and to literature classes. Discourse analysis procedures can also be used in such classes (Moorjani & Field, 1983). Most importantly, vocabulary can be related, as always, to its cultural context (Lafayette, 1988). Culturally related pre- and post-reading activities can be adapted for graduate courses and written “explications” can be structured so as to include cultural analysis.

### **Attitudes**

The well-prepared GTA:

- 1) *Is aware of stereotypes about the target culture and can explain their origins and inadequacy.*
- 2) *Can point out some indications of attitudes reflected in language, in quotations, in gestures, and in symbols.*

Graduate coursework in language, linguistics, and literature abounds in opportunities to explore (and explode) cultural stereotypes. The single most salutary way to do this is for professors to help students build cultural constructs befitting the complexity of cultural realities. When textbooks fail—as they most frequently do—to illuminate “the socio-political links between the cultural facts” (Kramsch, 1988, p. 83), it is the responsibility of a professor to do so. “Relations between facts should be sought at a sufficiently high level of abstraction to allow generalizations and meaningful contrast and analogy between the target and the native culture.”

### **Development of GTAs**

The preceding areas of knowledge are commonly represented in elementary language textbooks used by GTAs. As noted in the AATF standards document, they represent a consensus on the essentials of cultural competence (Nostrand, 1989, p. 14). The well-educated GTA will, at a minimum, be able to recognize cultural facts in a textbook and be able to place them into conceptual and value categories. The most effective instructors enliven the presentation of such abstractions with anecdotal evidence from their own experiences abroad. However, experience alone, while lending an invaluable authentic ring to a lesson, is insufficient: “To be more than an amateur observer, one needs to know how to relate the heterogeneous surface manifestations to underlying core elements” (Nostrand, 1989, p. 14).

It is the department’s responsibility to provide a theoretical framework and training in cultural perception. This is best done in a themati-

cally organized, research-oriented civilization/culture course offered early in the GTA's program. Ideally, the themes and concepts alluded to in this course would be developed and "revisited" at several points in the coursework.

It is the university's duty to provide study-abroad opportunities for any GTA lacking such experience. For example, West Virginia University routinely staffs its study-abroad programs in France, Germany, and Colombia with GTAs from within the department. Many of its ESL candidates interrupt their academic work with a year of teaching experience in the department's cooperative program with the Berkeley House School of Languages in Tokyo. Such practice may affect only some GTAs but it betokens a genuine commitment to the cultural education of its students.

## Linguistics

Linguistics illuminates much of the content of any language curriculum. As with culture, its scope is so broad as to intimidate and create problems in the selection of "minimal knowledge." AATF standards identify "Basic" competence as including the essentials of:

- 1) *Phonology;*
- 2) *Sound-symbol correspondences;*
- 3) *Lexicology and word-derivation rules;*
- 4) *Lexicography (the knowledge of dictionaries and how to use them);*
- 5) *Syntax and contrastive analysis;*
- 6) *Sociolinguistics (recognition of registers and levels of style);*
- 7) *Error analysis;*
- 8) *Acquisition and learning theory;*
- 9) *Cognitive learning style recognition;*
- 10) *Discourse analysis (recognition of spoken and written features beyond the sentence level) (Walz, 1989, p. 19).*

Moreover, the well-educated teacher can discuss these knowledge areas in relationship to the psychology of language learning and the methodology of L2 teaching. In other words, linguistics for the GTA must be "applied" in that it must clarify the nature of teaching materials and help the instructor in diagnosing learning difficulties and selecting rational learning activities. In addition to graduate coursework (out-

lined below), linguistic content needs to be incorporated into the “in-service” training of GTAs. Lesson plans should include the identification of linguistic features and objectives which are, at least in part, linguistically focused. For example, a lesson presenting direct object pronouns in French should include reference to the allophone [lez] in the spoken language.

This imperative would also seem to require *conscious coordination* of academic work in learning theory, linguistics (general and applied), and language teaching methodology. More precisely, it would seem desirable for the graduate program to include a minimum of one course in language acquisition theory, one in applied linguistics, and one linguistically oriented methods course.

The selection of appropriate teaching methods depends in large part on knowledge of the theoretical foundations of language teaching, providing “essential groundwork for the full understanding and use of methods and techniques” (Brown, 1987, p. xii). The domain of such knowledge spans topics like principles of human learning, first language acquisition, comparison of L1 and L2 acquisition, personality factors in L2 learning, sociocultural factors, interlanguage, error classifications, and so forth.

Experienced methods instructors know how frustrating it is to teach pedagogy in a linguistic void. When students in a methods class are unfamiliar with the tenets of contrastive analysis, generative transformational grammar, error analysis, and some of the newer concepts in linguistics, it is difficult, if not impossible, to give them—“en route”—the requisite background for working with contemporary instructional materials. A prerequisite course in the applied linguistics of their target language provides essential content needed for understanding current materials and methods. Equipped with such knowledge, students are prepared for linguistically structured projects in a methods class.

Schools which cannot afford this trio of experience will have to provide the training with some other mechanism. One possibility is to develop a one-term teaching practicum in which (outside) readings in linguistics are assigned and where lesson plans and supervisory efforts focus on linguistic content and problems. Such an approach would at least give GTAs minimal awareness of the role of linguistics in language teaching, while providing a forum for linguistically based discussions between GTAs and their mentors. An interesting research project might result from a comparison of these two strategies for communicating requisite linguistic knowledge.

## Literature

There is a minority view that literature has no place in lower-level language instruction. This article assumes the opposite, if only because so many practicing teachers *want* to use literary models in their teaching. There may, of course, be disadvantages with certain uses of literature, but that topic does not fall within the scope of this article.

One might assume that since most GTAs teaching foreign language are themselves enrolled in a graduate literature program, their preparation in the study of literature would, *ipso facto*, be guaranteed. One can probably conclude that such students will have been exposed to "representative works in all genres, selected from all periods" (AATF Basic Level competence). However, there are predictable works by authors commonly selected for lower-level instruction whose inclusion in any given graduate program remains a matter of chance. In answering the question "What literature should be learned by high school teachers of foreign language?" the AATF Commission consistently received the answer "familiarity with authors and works most likely to be taught in the schools." Such a pragmatic view is likely to be rejected by graduate faculty whose perceived mission is to facilitate a comprehensive grasp of the literature of a country or area. To be sure, not all GTAs are preparing for careers in high school teaching. Yet the pragmatic response suggests that graduate programs in literature provide students at some point with experience in *the selection of literary materials for language instruction at both the high school and college levels*. Cooper et al. (1990) affirm that there is little difference in basic language courses at the high school and college levels. Thus, a third-year high school teacher or a GTA teaching the intermediate level might want to present literary passages.

Such pedagogical experience could take the form of simple class discussions about the complexity of a work, coupled with reflections on its psychological value for students of different ages. Graduate faculty have no formal responsibility to apply directly their course content to the ends of language instruction. Still, if sensitized to the pedagogical needs of some of their students, they could easily divert part of their curriculum to such an end. This is another area in which a chairperson could exert leadership by organizing workshops on how to teach literature (i.e., approaches to literary study).

Another minimal competence needed by all teachers of foreign language is familiarity with *the terminology needed to discuss literature in the target language*. One cannot assume that coursework in literature will, *per se*, result in such knowledge. Individual institutions will determine

how best to inculcate this skill, but graduate program policymakers must be made keenly aware of its value in the repertoire of skills needed by all L2 instructors above the FLES level. They could, for example, modify the department's *explication de texte* (*explicación de textos*) courses to allow a discussion of the most basic literary terminology. Moreover, this need provides further support for the requirement that all graduate courses be taught in the TL.

Finally, according to AATF standards, the teacher should experience in his/her literature courses at least some of the following: drama workshops, personalized responses to literature, connotation awareness exercises, the preparation of language exercises based on literary materials, schema-development exercises, literary analysis, and creative (expressive) writing (Murphy & Goepfer, 1989, p. 18). It is probably not realistic to expect that all or even most of the preceding will be pursued in any particular program. Nevertheless, department chairpersons and graduate program planners should ensure that a variety of current approaches to literature is found somewhere in the education of the GTA. Implementation of AATF standards with respect to the teaching of literature will change the landscape of high school and college classrooms by creating a symbiotic relationship between administrative levels of education and between literature scholars and pedagogically oriented language teachers. One result may well be a renaissance of interest in the study of literature.

## Methodology

Methodology in this article is taken to include the entire array of attitudes, knowledge and skill at the disposal of a mature teacher of foreign language. It is the total universe of knowledge from which the novice draws sustenance and support. It includes above all a *problemsolving mind set* posited as the essential skill of teaching.

If methodology is ever to consist of more than unreflected training sessions, it must be taught within a context of *professional development*. The ambivalence of the GTA role militates against desirable professional attitudes. Many GTAs simply do not see themselves as teachers but rather as students with research interests. The large majority see themselves in the proverbial "catch 22" because of the excessive demands of these conflicting roles. We have just glimpsed the numerous content expectations imposed on any L2 instructor. The addition of methodology, that ever-changing welter of *applied* concepts, adds a weight that is seemingly unbearable to a training agenda that is already overcharged.



“Training” is the operational word—unfortunately. The University of Louisville, like many who find that any GTA orientation program is insufficient (Altman, 1987, p.175), supplements an early orientation with two additional ones throughout the semester on topics selected by the GTAs from a list circulated by its Center for Faculty and Staff Development. It might be thus more appropriately called a GTA development program. GTA development programs take many forms including the issuance of program certificates, outstanding GTA teaching awards, first-year internships, the publication of GTA handbooks and even newsletters, video review sessions, and most commonly, courses on college teaching (Chism, 1987, pp. 126-7).

Education as opposed to “training” is a formative process which spans many years of one’s professional life. (Murphy & Goepper, 1989, p. 29) At the University of California, Davis, GTAs are viewed as future faculty in need of an ongoing program of professional development. The University of South Carolina assigns first-year GTAs to a mentor faculty member who guides the novice through an apprenticeship of language teaching in a proficiency context.

A novice instructor presumably starts without knowledge of the techniques required for teaching the four skills. More importantly, he or she might not know how to set goals or make up tests. At the most critical level, the person might be unmotivated for teaching and/or deficient in strategies for motivating students. The broad sweep of methodology speaks to each of these problems and to countless others.

For example, the AATF standards distinguish Basic and Superior Levels of competence for methodology (Berwald, 1989). The former contains eight competencies ranging from familiarity with modern pedagogical developments to presentation of the (four) major skills, to managing classroom dynamics. AATSP, following the *ACTFL Provisional Program Guidelines for Foreign Language Teaching*, has identified three types of development: personal, professional, and specialist, defined as follows:

*Personal Development*—the knowledge, skills, modes of thought, attitudes, and leadership qualities derived from a strong liberal arts education;

*Professional Development*—the knowledge and skills derived from education and experience in the art and science of pedagogy;

*Specialist Development*—the knowledge and skills associated with being a specialist in the language and culture to be taught (AATSP, p. 1).

All three contribute, directly or indirectly, to the “methodology” needed by GTAs. Unfortunately, in the specialized world of university life, courses to foster personal development are usually assigned to

undergraduate programs in a liberal arts college, while professional and specialist development is the prerogative of education units outside a foreign language department. Thus, the new GTA suffers from a flawed educational system in which he/she enters graduate school deprived of requisite background knowledge. The problem is two-dimensional: (1) undergraduate programs in the liberal arts are often inadequate for personal development needs and (2) professional or specialist training in the rudiments of teaching is missing. This compound problem needs to be taken into account by anyone trying to reform the system. No panaceas exist, but the following discussion of methodology will include exemplary principles and practices designed to fill some of the void. One statement from the AATSP document holds promise as a pragmatic interim principle: "It is important that programs present theories and models proposed to explain learning in general and that this information be related to models hypothesized for foreign language learning through curricular or instructional linkage" (p. 7). With the limited time available for GTA development, it can safely be said that much background information will have to be imparted in the "hands-on" setting of foreign language instruction.

GTA inexperience with classroom techniques has been well-documented in the professional literature. Ervin and Muyskens (1982) studied GTA perceptions of basic teaching needs. Herron (1983) discussed the pressures on foreign language teachers to "humanize" their instruction. Schulz (1980) reported results of a survey on actual GTA training practices, as did Nerenz, Herron, and Knop (1979). Despite increased attention to the topic, curriculum planning for a GTA methods class remains clouded in subjectivity. The above-mentioned writers and others have, however, underscored certain critical concerns that form a core of topics generally endorsed by foreign language educators.

Ervin and Muyskens' subjects gave highest priority to: (1) learning teaching methods and techniques, (2) teaching the four skills, (3) teaching conversation or speaking, (4) making the class interesting, (5) making the best use of class time, (6) teaching grammar, and (7) inspiring/motivating students (p. 342). From the scant literature available and especially from experience with scores of practicing GTAs, one gets a strong impression that the highest priority should be given to classroom *survival skills*, the Monday morning needs of L2 instructors. Ervin and Muyskens agree, concluding that "the primary purpose of a TA training course should be to develop specific professional skills" (p. 343).

Of course, the more one plunges into the practicalities of language teaching, the greater the risk of myopia, of limiting one's vision to a surface structure of here-and-now reality. A more enlightened albeit



complex approach for both the GTA and graduate program leadership is to suffer that constant nagging sense of incompleteness, alternating between the satisfactions of task accomplishment and an unfulfilled need to expand one's consciousness in cognitive and affective areas of instruction. Future teachers need not fear the open-endedness of the task if they are taught to adopt an *i + 1* philosophy into their own learning styles and if they are given a panoramic sense of the job to be done.

AATF standards call for a minimum of *two* methods courses in order to insure exposure to the wide range of theoretical and practical matters encompassed by the field. One may or may not agree on the number of required courses in the already overcharged program of most GTAs. However, there can be no doubt about the large scope of needed pedagogical knowledge nor of the need to develop professional attitudes from the very beginning of the GTA's tenure.

Virtually every institution requires some form of orientation program for new GTAs. They vary from single-day sessions to two-week courses. Orientations provide basic policy information needed for instruction and often involve a kind of "mini-course" in methodology. Obviously new teachers must learn the rudiments of instructional planning and guidelines for good interpersonal relations (with their students, peers, and faculty). They must be readied for that daunting "first day of class," armed with a sure knowledge of the program philosophy, the nature of instructional materials in use, and essential organizational matters. The content of sessions may vary from department to department, but all seek to give GTAs a basic familiarity with acceptable procedures for surviving the early weeks of instruction.

West Virginia University adds a research facet to its orientation. GTAs receive an introduction to research in the department's optional research areas—culture, linguistics, literature, and methodology. They are encouraged to look for research topics not only in their coursework *but also in their instructional activities*. They are taught how to find authentic cultural materials and are taken to the library for a special briefing on reference sources especially useful for foreign language teaching. Most will build on this experience by taking a bibliography course in one of the four research areas. The important point is that, from the outset, research is presented as an activity related both to academic coursework *and to teaching*. This policy has resulted in a number of quality research papers on such topics as trends in L2 acquisition, cultural materials development, contrastive analysis of English and Chinese, and a model for using the fable to teach composition.

## **Methodology: Special Concerns**

The teaching profession in the late twentieth century is characterized by concerns that have not traditionally been priorities in foreign language education. Three of them merit discussion here.

### **Preparation for Eclecticism or Broadening the Base of Permissible Options**

Many L2 methodologists endorse an "eclectic" approach to language teaching. Few, however, consider the implications of such a proposition. Enlightened eclecticism does not just happen but depends on a judicious blending of objectives and techniques. Kramsch (1988) recommends a reframing of traditional questions asked in foreign language education, seeing both performance and competence as inextricably linked to the use of language in discourse. Just as there are different kinds of discourse, all inherently equal in their natural environments, one finds myriads of methods, each appropriate for a particular classroom "culture." Eclecticism too requires an "intercultural" approach based on openness to the many options in language teaching.

In order to effect such an *aggiornamento*, L2 methodologists should rethink their biases. Long-held antipathies to such traditional practices as translation, drill, bilingual vocabulary lists, and lecture, for example, will have to be re-examined in the interest of renewal. Judgment must be withheld until a fully developed articulated methodology emerges for comment. This is difficult when faddish terms like "communicative approach," "teaching for proficiency," or "humanistic teaching" determine what will or will not be allowed into the methods program. The following brief rethinking of lecture is offered as a case in point.

If L2 teachers (and especially methodologists) were polled to determine the most undesirable classroom activities, lecture would undoubtedly be at or near the top of the list. Yet Omaggio (1986, p. 375) admits it as a potentially legitimate means of teaching culture: "This strategy can be effective if teachers are careful to (1) keep it brief, (2) enliven it with visuals, realia, and accounts of personal experience, (3) focus on some specific aspect of cultural experience, (4) have students take notes, (5) use follow-up techniques in which students use the target language actively...."

In reading Allen and Reuter's (1990) analysis of the technique, one comes to see it in a more positive light. They cite its values as providing new information and insights, inspiring student interest in a subject, and presenting a living model of scholarship. It imposes on the teacher rigorous preparatory activities: developing a skeletal structure, provid-

ing elaborative details, and creating structural (transitional) signposts. To be successful, it must make ideas interesting, which implies, *inter alia*, “emotional as well as intellectual preparation.” Finally, it involves real communication, which entails student feedback, incorporates ideas “in a vivid and tangible manner” and, at its best, invites class involvement, including questions and a peer exchange of reactions (pp. 81-91).

Are there not numerous parallels between these essential features of a good lecture and the time-honored practice of *presentation* in a foreign language class? This is not to suggest a one-to-one correspondence but just a recommendation to rethink this largely taboo subject in L2 methodology. Moreover, training in the proper use of the lecture technique creates another bridge between the GTA’s academic work and his or her teaching.

### Critical Thinking

Education today is largely a matter of teaching people how to learn. More precisely, it means teaching critical thinking skills, another largely neglected aspect of L2 methodology. The release in 1983 of the Commission on Excellence in Education’s report *A Nation at Risk*, inspired a wave of reformers who argued, in the words of Darling-Hammond and Berry (1988) that “the present educational system did not prepare students for jobs in an increasingly technological society; teachers *must be prepared to teach not only basic skills but highly technical knowledge, and must stimulate students to think critically about the complex issues they will face in their lives and careers*” (author’s emphasis).

The callow years of a graduate teaching assistantship are an ideal time to develop and pass on the strategies of critically-thinking language learners. According to Zimmer-Loew (1989), such people:

- 1) have insight into their own language learning styles;
- 2) take an active approach to learning;
- 3) are willing to take risks;
- 4) are good guessers;
- 5) are prepared to attend to form as well as content;
- 6) develop the TL into a separate reference system;
- 7) have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the TL.

Of course, one does find the “inductive teaching of grammar” in methods classes, as if inductive thinking could be confined to a two-minute generalization process. Zimmer-Loew has clarified the many ways in which L2 classroom activities incorporate common thinking skills and strategies. For example, it consists of concept formation (listing data, grouping data, labeling/categorizing data), interpretation of data (identifying critical relationships, exploring relations, making inferences), and the application of principles (predicting/hypothesizing, explaining predictions, verifying predictions).

Such operations are more than incidental by-products of language instruction. In fact, they go to the core of language competence and performance. Outstanding learners—teachers and students—instinctively use critical-thinking processes/techniques. Many, perhaps most, are but dimly aware of their presence in a dynamic L2 classroom. Future assimilation into L2 curricula of techniques designed to foster critical thinking will depend to a large extent on their prominence in L2 methodology. As seminal elements in education, they must first be *experienced* by prospective teachers, a further testimonial to the maxim “Nemo dat quod non habet” (One does not give what the self lacks).

The attitudes of critical thinkers are probably both innate and learned. The methods class, however, is one place where one can *reflect* on one’s learning style and become aware of others. For the young GTA, it is an opportunity to crystallize a self-concept, albeit one that will change through the years.

### Problem Solving

The foreign language profession has never given serious attention to the concept of teaching as a problem-solving activity. Yet experience tells us that good teachers, like most creative people, recognize problems, define them (in terms meaningful to themselves), propose solutions (consciously or instinctively), and note or measure the relative success or failure of their action. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (1989, p. 2) has put problem solving at the center of its efforts to create a national license for accomplished teachers:

The Board’s standards will give weight to a teacher’s disposition to act ethically in their student’s interests, often balancing conflicting objectives. Emphasis will not only be placed on providing students with a deep understanding of the subjects they study, but also on developing their ability to reason and take multiple perspectives, to be creative and take risks, and to adopt an experimental and problem-solving orientation.

The life of a GTA is fraught with problems—content problems, methodology problems, and problems in professional relations. As novice teachers, they struggle to cope with daily requirements, like keeping up with a syllabus. Where in their training are they taught how to perform the essential function of teaching—problem-formulation and “action research to gauge the effect of a hypothesized solution? In most graduate programs today this training is simply not provided except through anecdotal comments and advice from supervising faculty and fellow GTAs.

In 1973, I proposed a problem-solving mini-course that could be used either in a methods class or as part of a practicum linked to the GTA’s teaching. It starts with a sample tape in which an L2 teacher is guided gradually to state a classroom problem in observable terms and to come up with a plan for measuring its magnitude. Students proceed to interview each other, following the tape model but also asking questions appropriate to their circumstances. At the conclusion of their conversation, the interviewer writes a memo summarizing as concisely as possible the nature of the problem and the measurement plan. In a second interview (a week later), measurement data are reported and solutions discussed. One solution is selected, together with a new measurement plan. In a third (final) interview, pretreatment and posttreatment data are compared to determine the relative success of the proposed solution. The course teaches interviewing skills, memo-writing skill, and, most critically, the scientific spirit of teaching.

No doubt there are numerous other ways to present functional research skills to the GTA. Nevertheless, the point to be made is that national standards in an era of professionalism will almost certainly value problem-solving skills more than in the past.

## Conclusion

We should follow the directions outlined in our emerging national standards as we reform our programs for guiding GTAs in their professional development. We need to create closer ties between graduate-level academic work and the instruction of lower-level language classes. Both facets of the GTA’s dual role would thus be enhanced. As Allen (1985, p. 6) states, “There is no way to internalize knowledge more effectively than by attempting to explain it to others.” In L2 study in particular, new knowledge needs to be applied without delay. Updated information and its instructional application will simply have to respond to the demands of modern times. The dual role of the GTA in contemporary universities can actually facilitate such an imperative. This will happen when GTAs infuse their instructional curricula with fresh



insights gleaned from graduate coursework which, in turn, will be renewed through exploration into pragmatic realms needed for effective undergraduate instruction (culture, applied linguistics, L2 learning theory, etc.)

Local graduate program reform must be undertaken with a clear understanding of *the process of educational change*. The Rand Corporation (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988,) stresses three distinct components: policy, administration, and educational practice. We might consider policy to exist when local planners screen national standards for their applicability to local (departmental) needs. Administration involves the greatest flexibility: "At the administrative level, different localities may have extremely different needs and resources, so a reform with a single stated mission—to improve reading—may be implemented in a variety of ways." In the practice phase, teachers—GTAs in this instance—select those aspects of the new curriculum that fit into their existing teaching structure. While not as experienced as certified teachers, GTAs nonetheless have a vital role to play in the reform process. Policy works on a high level of abstraction but "reforms work only when they can accommodate regional and individual variability" (p. 2). Only GTAs can provide the feedback necessary to convert reform experimentation into an ongoing process of change.

Certain questions will need to be examined by all graduate program reformers. They include the following:

- 1) What nonteaching assignments does the department give to GTAs and how do they relate to instruction?
- 2) Are the duties sequenced so as to become part of the training program?
- 3) Is a GTA's special area of expertise (when present) utilized?
- 4) Is subject matter expertise assumed to develop simultaneously with graduate study or does the GTA experience require special kinds of training?

Such questions, coupled with the statements of professional competence now issuing from professional language teaching organizations, provide a firm foundation for the reform of graduate foreign language programs. If applied, they humanize the system by acting on the reality that GTAs are individuals with unique backgrounds. Initial assignments and training experiences should be, at least in part, tailored to individual needs. The numerous responsibilities of the GTA require structure and sequencing if the net effect of an internship is to produce development in line with national standards. Standards are for all practicing teachers.

It makes eminent sense to start applying them—benevolently, of course—in the education of a GTA.

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