

# **AAUSC Issues in Language Program Direction**

## **Advanced Foreign Language Learning: A Challenge to College Programs**

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# Literacy and Advanced Foreign Language Learning: Rethinking the Curriculum

Richard G. Kern

## ***Abstract***

*Advanced level language learning has to do with much more than 'language' per se. It requires familiarization with new frames of interpretation, new genres, new social practices, and new ways of thinking in and about the language in question. This chapter argues that these kinds of familiarization are largely issues of literacy, and it explores ways in which literacy can be used as an organizing principle to design language curricula that problematize the linguistic, cognitive, and social relationships that link readers, writers, texts, and culture. Sample literacy project ideas are presented in the Appendix to exemplify this problematizing approach to language teaching.*

As I write this paper I am beginning a term of service as Study Center Director for the University of California Education Abroad Programs in Lyon and Grenoble, France. Because all of our year-long program participants enroll in French university courses just like French nationals (and are thus by definition advanced language learners), I am acutely aware of the problems our students face as they attempt to perform their hard-earned competence in an academic setting abroad. I am also aware of the limitations of our lower-division language curricula back home in preparing our students for this kind of academic immersion experience. As far as I can see at present, the main problem is not one of 'language' in the sense of structures and lexicon per se. Our students have enough grammar and vocabulary to get by in their day-to-day lives, looking for housing, buying groceries, making friends, and the like. In fact, most of them are quite well prepared for this aspect of their year abroad. The real problem seems to be one of language use in an academic context. That is, the challenge of understanding and adapting to a different academic culture and, in particular, adapting to the kinds of listening, reading, and writing they are expected to do.

Students arrive in France with the idea that academic language use is pretty much universal, but soon realize that there are subtle yet important differences. For example, extracting the main ideas from a lecture and synthesizing them in a French *résumé* seems a straightforward task, but it proves to be challenging for our students who are thinking in terms of an American 'summary'. Reading is extensive and unguided, requiring students to develop much greater independence and discernment, as well as good skimming abilities. Writing an exam seems like a familiar concept until one gets comments praising one's information recall but deploring one's "lack of method." What our students need to understand is how seemingly familiar language and literacy practices can be slightly or radically different in a foreign cultural matrix. They need to be socialized into new forms of language use (and this includes a focus on form at all levels of the system,

from lexicogrammatical choices to discourse organization and genres), but they also need to reflect on how these new forms of language use relate to the ones they are familiar with from their home culture.

Some readers may object that study abroad is a goal for only a small proportion of our students, and that we ought not cater to the needs of that select group in designing our mainstream language curricula. There is some merit to this argument. I am not suggesting that we indoctrinate our students into the particular discourse practices of foreign universities. But if our goal is to promote the highest possible attainment, whether or not our students study abroad, then sooner or later we will be faced with the imperative of familiarizing our students with new frames of interpretation, new genres, new social practices, and new ways of thinking in and about the language. The idea that I would like to present in this paper is that these kinds of familiarization, key to advanced language learning at home *or* abroad, are largely issues of literacy, and demand renewed and invigorated attention to *written* communication throughout the curriculum.

## Focus on Literacy

Reading and writing have always been part of the FL curriculum, but they have tended to be treated as straightforward acts of decoding and encoding meaning. It is certainly true that reading and writing involve decoding and encoding, but this is not the whole truth. Beyond psycholinguistic processes like word recognition, parsing, and schema activation lie issues of interpretation that are social as well as cognitive in nature. For example, the word 'libéral' in French has essentially the same dictionary definition as 'liberal' in English, and yet 'politique libérale' usually points to the political right in France, while 'liberal politics' points to the left in the United States. What is all too often lacking in foreign language classrooms is explicit attention to the sociocultural, contextual, and relational factors that influence the particular meanings that speakers, readers, and writers produce—what Galisson (1987) has called the 'charge culturelle partagée' of language. As a consequence, foreign language students often take half-meanings for whole meanings or they take a normed meaning (that is, *the* meaning/theme/point of a text as expressed by an authority) as the *only* possible meaning. Similarly, they often think of writing in terms of prescribed patterns, seeking the idealized 'best' form for expressing a given set of thoughts (if only they could find it!). Reading and writing certainly do involve prescribed uses of language, but these uses vary across discourse communities (even among academic departments) and students need to be primed for multiple, not singular, literacies.

What I mean by 'literacy', then, is more than reading and writing as skills or as prescribed patterns of thinking. It is about relationships between readers, writers, texts, culture, and language learning. It is about the variable cognitive and social practices of taking and making textual meaning that provide students access to new communities outside the classroom, across geographical and historical boundaries. It involves an awareness of how acts of reading, writing, and conversation *create* and *shape* meanings, not merely transfer them from one individual or group to another. It is precisely because literacy is not monolithic, but variable and multiple, tied to the various sociocultural practices of a given society, that it is of key importance in our teaching of language and culture.

When we consider reading and writing in their social contexts of use—as complementary dimensions of written communication, rather than as distinct linguistic and cognitive skills—we more easily see how they are connected to other dimensions of

language use. Experience shows that students cannot develop the high level of spoken communication ability required in academic settings without a serious commitment to the study of written communication (e.g., Byrnes 1998). Recent curricular work (Barnes-Karol 2002; Berman 1996; Byrnes 1998, 2000, 2001; Sternfeld 1992; Swaffar, Arens, and Byrnes 1991) suggests that literacy can serve as an effective organizing principle for academic language teaching and foster more integrated and coherent instruction within and across levels of the language curriculum.

Focusing on literacy does not mean abandoning a communicative focus and reverting back to a grammar-translation variety of teaching. Rather, it means taking 'communicative language teaching' at its word, exploring the complex relations between written and oral communication, and engaging students in reading and writing as acts of communication that are just as real, and just as social, as speaking and listening. It means sensitizing students to relationships between language, texts, and social contexts, in order to deepen their understanding of language and culture and ultimately to enhance their communicative capacity as human beings.

Consequently, oral communication does not take a back seat in a literacy-based approach. Indeed, effective oral communication in academic settings requires 'literate' sensitivities to the particular ways a language can be used for particular purposes in particular settings. Some preliminary research supports the notion that reading and writing can improve learners' speaking ability. In his ethnographic study of elementary college French students' learning, Loughrin-Sacco (1992) found that reading and writing enhanced students' small-group oral work and "contributed heavily" to their overall speaking ability (p. 98). Similarly, Lightbown (1992) found that young ESL learners in a comprehension-based program were substantially better able to describe pictures than were learners in the regular program, even though the comprehension-based program did not provide in-class speaking practice. Lightbown hypothesizes that the experimental group's superiority in verbal description was a consequence of those learners' more frequent listening and reading of sustained text. Ehri (1987) hypothesizes that written language, by making possible a visual-spatial representation of speech, can enhance memory for speech as well as support the development of metalinguistic skills. Freedle (1985) found that oral recall protocols were much better when they were preceded by written protocols, hypothesizing that "some skills that make for competent writing may be transferable directly to the oral mode" (p. 121).

To illustrate how oral and written modes can be integrated to mutual benefit in a classroom setting, consider the following example of an experimental intermediate-level EFL course in Italy, in which writing was used as a transformative step between reading and speaking in a content-based project on American Indians (Cortese 1985).<sup>1</sup>

Cortese's students first did preliminary background reading in Italian and then chose books in English from a teacher-prepared bibliography according to their particular disciplinary interests (e.g., anthropological, economic, historical, political perspectives). Students had one month to read and to prepare an oral report on the book's main topics and lines of argument as well as the writer's attitudes as reflected in the text. Because students' oral performance had previously consisted mostly of brief utterances, Cortese realized that her students needed practice in discourse planning and cohesion devices before they could effectively deliver their reports. She addressed this need by having students write and peer edit successive drafts of their oral presentations. Through the writing process, Cortese observed that her students became more aware "that problems of meaning derived only to a limited extent from lexical items or lack of grammatical accuracy" (p. 15) and that writing allowed them to deal in a concrete way with the transition from speaking in brief utterances to producing extended, connected discourse. After their

written exposés were completed, Cortese's role shifted from one of facilitator to that of explicit language instructor: she systematically dealt with common problems ranging from diction to syntax to rhetorical organization by taking several examples of each problem from students' writing and reworking the samples with the whole class.

Following their oral reports, the students then did a simulation of a United States Supreme Court hearing concerning a land claim. This simulation involved a wide range of testimony role-plays. Students worked together in small groups, wrote out their speeches, and videotaped their final performance for evaluation purposes. Cortese notes that providing students with these project-oriented reading and writing tasks brought her students to a whole new level of expressive sophistication in their speaking:

The variety of speech acts which the students could handle in connected discourse was substantially greater than at the beginning of the course. But it was the ability to convey point of view and illocutionary force, to match verbal behavior to its intended effect, and to use codes appropriate to the interacting partner ... that was most rewarding, as one could see the participants actually *doing* things with words (p. 22).

This example shows us a number of points about literacy in relation to language learning. First of all, we can see that literacy involves more than reading and writing in a strict sense. Literacy events (Heath 1983) often involve a broad range of written, *as well as oral* language use. Here students were reading, discussing, writing, and role-playing in multiple overlapping cycles, with each mode of language use affecting all others.

Second, following from this point, we can see that literacy is social and collaborative in nature. In this classroom project the students were not working in isolation but with the feedback and assistance of their peers and the teacher. But even in non-group situations, people write for an audience (including themselves), and their decisions about what needs to be said and what can go without saying are based on their understanding of their audience. When people read they must contribute their motivation, knowledge, and experience in order to make a text meaningful. All too often we ask our students to do what they usually consider the most difficult tasks—reading and writing—in isolation at home. One of the goals of literacy-based language teaching is to bring reading and writing into the interactive, collaborative sphere of the classroom.

Third, literacy depends on conventions. How people read and write is not universal, but governed by cultural conventions. But conventions evolve through use and people modify them as needed for their own individual purposes. Here the students had to adapt their language (i.e., use some unfamiliar conventions) to make their communication more appropriate for the medium and context of expression (though the conventions were no doubt modified to suit their language abilities). Once appropriated, these conventions become resources for subsequent language use.

Fourth, literacy involves interpretation. When we write we interpret the world (events, experiences, ideas, etc.), and when we read we interpret a writer's interpretation in terms of our own conception of the world. Interpretation is guided by social conventions but also by individual insight. The students in this class had to interpret arguments and attitudes from both written and oral discourse. They also had to interpret (and reinterpret) the project tasks.

Fifth, literacy involves active thinking. Because words are always embedded in linguistic and situational contexts, reading and writing involve figuring out relationships between words, between larger units of meaning, and between texts and real or imagined worlds. Here one of the key problems Cortese's students had to confront was how

to move from short utterances to extended discourse. The solution involved a combination of overt instruction, writing, reflection, and interaction.

Sixth, literacy is recursive. Because reading and writing allow students to go back repeatedly to the texts they read and write, literacy can foster analysis and reflection about the processes of producing and interpreting meaning through language. Here, students' successive drafts of their oral presentations increased their awareness of the multiple dimensions of making meaning and eased the transition to extended discourse. Rereading, rewriting, and rethinking are key not only to language learning but also to the development of critical analytical abilities. This is an important point made repeatedly by Swaffar (1991, 1993a, 1993b).

In the following sections we will consider how these features of literacy might help us design curricula focused on the linguistic, cognitive, and social relationships between readers, writers, texts, and culture in order to prepare our students for the broadest range of language use, in ways that are consistent with the goals of the national *Standards for Foreign Language Learning*.

## Curriculum Design

First a few words about curriculum design. Curriculum can be thought of as a conceptual map of what students and teachers do over time, and the relationships among the various things they do. This conceptual map encodes decisions about *what* to teach (i.e., content), *how* to teach it (i.e., method and sequencing) and *why* (i.e., goals). These decisions are always based on educators' beliefs about the nature of learning, the nature of what is to be taught, and the nature of the learners and the learning institution. Curriculum is therefore inevitably bound to context, culture, and ideology.

As Byrnes (2000) points out, however, curriculum can (and too often does) occur by default rather than by conscious design. That is to say, curriculum can be an "accidental outcome" when professors' intellectual energy is focused at the level of individual courses and any linkages between courses are left for students to forge on their own. Curriculum by design, on the other hand, happens when a department's teaching faculty collaboratively develops a vision of the desired educational outcomes for their students and designs a coherent academic plan for achieving that collective vision. It is in the interest of fostering discussion of this type that I propose literacy as an organizing principle for academic language teaching.

## Goals of the Curriculum: Rethinking the Aims of Language Study

The realities of language use militate against strict boundaries separating reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Speech in certain contexts can resemble writing; writing in certain contexts can resemble speech. Consequently, listening to lectures and speeches requires modes of understanding normally associated with reading. Conversely, reading dialogue or personal narrative style in novels requires considerable knowledge of how language is used in spoken contexts. Effective participation in a verbal debate or formal discussion demands 'literate' speech, whereas writing an engaging narrative often involves conveying an 'orate' tone of personal involvement. The ability to write well cannot be learned without reading. Moreover, writing demands some understanding of readers and how they will likely read the text. By the same token, sensitive, analytic reading may require a 'writer's eye'.

Given these realities, an integrated approach is called for in organizing the language curriculum. While it can of course be desirable to focus narrowly on discrete skills at various points in a language curriculum, we cannot lose sight of the essential interconnect-edness of all aspects of language use. An overarching goal of literacy can provide a unifying focus by drawing students' attention to the interactions among form, context, and function in all their uses of language—whether they are speaking, listening, reading, or writing. Furthermore, a focus on literacy removes the artificial separation of skills and content. Because language use itself becomes an object of analysis and reflection, it provides a source of intellectual content.

A literacy-based curriculum:

- aims to prepare learners to interpret multiple forms of language use (oral and written) in multiple contexts (some perhaps quite different from those learners are familiar with).
- fosters communicative ability in a new language, but also emphasizes within that general goal the development of learners' ability to recursively analyze, interpret, and transform discourse (thus encouraging a 'metacommunicative' awareness of how discourse is derived from relations between language use, contexts of interaction, and larger sociocultural contexts).
- aims to integrate communicative approaches to language teaching with more analytic, text-based approaches—it does not represent an out-and-out replacement of current 'communicative' curricula so much as an enhancement that places full value on written and visual communication, as well as on oral communication. That is to say it is "communicative," but in the very broadest sense of the term.
- incorporates a range of written, spoken, visual, and audiovisual texts that broadly represent the particular signifying practices of a society.
- pays attention to the *relationships* among the particular text types, particular purposes, and particular conventions of reading and writing in particular contexts.
- problematizes discourse and provides learners with structured guidance in the thinking that goes into reading, writing, and speaking appropriately for particular contexts.
- focuses on linguistic, cognitive, and social dimensions of language use in an integrated way, bringing reading and writing into the mainstream interactive realm of the classroom.
- encourages students to take an active, critical stance to the discourse conventions we teach them.
- attempts to establish these as common goals across introductory, intermediate, and advanced levels of language study.

The curriculum shares with communicative language teaching an emphasis on problem solving in the sense of piecing together meanings in context and figuring out what is appropriate to say and do in various situations. But it also moves beyond problem-solving to include *problematizing* the sayings, doings, and meanings that are encountered along the way. That is to say, it is based not only on cognitive theories of understanding and learning but also on social and critical theories of language and literacy. Where interpretation

is concerned, normative, 'native' interpretations are not the goal. Instead, the goal is for students to begin to understand how the interpretations they *do* come up with (sometimes distinctly non-native) are influenced by their beliefs, attitudes, and experiences—in other words, by their 'world' as constituted by their culture.

### Compatibility with National Standards

The above goals of a literacy-based curriculum mesh extremely well with the goals of the National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project (1996). Below are the Five Cs the Standards Task Force established as goals for foreign language learners in the United States. In summarizing the goal statements I have italicized key words to highlight the similarities to the features of literacy described on pages 5 and 6 and to the curricular goals listed above.

Communication	Understanding and <i>interpreting</i> written and spoken language on varied topics, communicating in meaningful and <i>appropriate</i> ways, taking <i>audience</i> and <i>context</i> into account (i.e., rhetorical demands—this requires being able to shift frames of reference, norms, assumptions of what can and can't be said, and so forth).
Cultures	Understanding <i>relationships</i> between the <i>social practices, cultural products, and perspectives</i> (beliefs, values, attitudes, ideas) of people in the foreign culture (i.e., reading a cultural 'code' through texts).
Connections	Strengthening <i>knowledge</i> of other disciplines through language study—art, music, film studies, history, etc.; acquiring information and <i>recognizing viewpoints</i> available through the language and its cultures (i.e., seeing how different rules of interpretation operate in a different disciplinary and/or cultural system).
Comparisons	Understanding the nature of language/culture through <i>comparisons</i> of the language/culture studied and their own (i.e., thinking critically about cultural systems and about how languages work).
Communities	<i>Participating in</i> multilingual <i>communities</i> at home and around the world for personal enjoyment and enrichment. Literacy is key here since writing and the visual media are the primary means by which we learn about and relate to past and present worlds outside our immediate community. When we examine the particular ways that language is used to capture and express ideas and experiences, we not only learn a great deal about the conventions of the language—we also begin to glimpse the beliefs and values that underlie another people's culture and uses of language. This lies at the very heart of the FL Standards project (five Cs summarized, with my commentary, from the National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project 1996, p. 9).

The Standards also explicitly move us away from an orientation toward the four skills of listening, reading, speaking, writing, and move us toward a focus on *interpersonal*, *interpretive*, and *presentational modes*—these latter two modes being clearly issues of literacy.

## The What and the How of the Curriculum

The specific content and implementation of a language curriculum must be determined according to the language in question, local goals, student needs, materials, and resources. Nevertheless, some general guidelines can be sketched out in broad terms, and I will attempt such a sketch in the sections that follow.

### Four Curricular Components

In developing activities and tasks to accomplish the above aims of a literacy-based curriculum, it is useful to refer to four curricular components proposed by the New London Group (1996)—a team of ten literacy scholars from Australia, Great Britain, and the U.S., including Courtney Cazden, Bill Cope, Norman Fairclough, James Gee, and Gunther Kress, among others, who held their first meeting in New London, Connecticut. The four components are: situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice.

*Situated practice* is immersion in language use, with an emphasis on apprenticeship, experience, pattern recognition, and socialization. The focus is on communicating in the 'here and now', on learners' personal experiences, and on the spontaneous expression of their thoughts, opinions and feelings, without conscious reflection or metalanguage. The competencies involved in situated practice correspond to Cummins' (1981) notion of context-embedded language use, or BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills). The other three curricular components—overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice—contribute to what Cummins called CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency), which tends not to develop automatically from social interaction but which is of key importance to academic success.

*Overt instruction* entails developing an explicit metalanguage so that the teacher and students can identify, talk about, and learn the various elements that contribute to particular meanings in communication. Pedagogically, it involves creating scaffolded learning activities, not just drills and memorization. Overt instruction therefore introduces an element of conscious control as well as a vocabulary to allow students to talk about communication processes.

*Critical framing* has to do with the reflective, analytical dimension of language and literacy teaching. Whereas situated practice focuses on the immediate 'here and now', critical framing involves stepping back and looking at the 'then and there' of communication. It involves drawing on the metalanguage that was developed through overt instruction to direct learners' attention to relationships among elements within the linguistic system as well as relationships between language use and social contexts and purposes. Critical framing thus engages the ability to critique systems and their relations to other systems in terms of power, ideology, and values (New London Group 1996).

*Transformed practice* involves acts in which students create new texts on the basis of existing ones, or reshape texts to make them appropriate for contexts of communication other than those for which they were originally intended. It therefore entails seeing relationships across contexts of cultural expression (oral, textual, visual, audiovisual, etc.). Writing an analytic essay about a text that has been read would be one common academic example of transformed practice. The focus here is on the process of designing meaning to suit the constraints of both immediate and larger sociocultural contexts.

We can think of these four components as the 'basic food groups' needed to meet language learners' literacy 'nutritional needs', to borrow a metaphor from Schachter (1983).

Situated practice and overt instruction have traditionally constituted the bulk of language teaching at the beginning and intermediate levels. Necessary as they are, they are not sufficient for the development of students' critical or cultural understanding of language, literacy, and communication. In fact, the New London Group (1996) contends, "both immersion and many sorts of Overt Instruction are notorious as socializing agents that can render learners quite uncritical and unconscious of the cultural locatedness of meanings and practices" (p. 85). Unfortunately, the complementary nutritional elements of critical framing and transformed practice are all too often either reserved for the elite in advanced-level courses or not provided at all. A major goal of a literacy-based language curriculum, then, is to provide a well-balanced instructional 'diet' for all language learners at *all* levels of the curriculum.

That is not to say, however, that every task and activity need involve all four components. The Cortese project cited earlier emphasized overt instruction (training in discourse strategies, cohesion devices, diction, syntax, rhetorical organization) and transformed practice (transforming content gained through reading into a written draft and then an oral report, then retransforming into a simulation and role-plays). Critical framing was involved to some extent in the peer editing activities, but was not the major thrust of this project. Had the teacher wanted to highlight this component, students could have been asked to analyze and compare their forms of language use in the written and oral (videotaped) contexts or to evaluate the effectiveness of their verbal interaction in the recorded simulation and role plays. The sample project ideas presented in the Appendix of this chapter emphasize primarily situated practice and critical framing. The point is that in the context of the curriculum, all four components should be represented over the *complete range* of classroom and extramural activities, but not necessarily within any given one.

### **Implications of a Literacy-based Curriculum for Teaching Methodology**

The core principle of a literacy-based approach to language teaching is getting students to see texts (including their own!) as information systems that reflect cultural systems and that are interpreted (in both conventional and idiosyncratic ways) in particular contexts. The goal is not only to teach content but also to *model a problematizing approach to learning* that learners can take with them and continue to apply in new contexts that they encounter beyond the classroom (e.g., study abroad, social work, independent research, international internships, etc.). Key to this approach is asking critical questions that problematize meaning in discourse (written as well as oral). The sample project ideas in the Appendix broadly exemplify this problematizing approach.

As far as sequencing is concerned, the traditional way to organize language curriculum is to have students master successively larger constituent elements, beginning with phrases, then sentences, then paragraphs, and finally extended discourse. Such a sequence may be eminently logical, but it does not mesh well with the psychological needs of language learners who strive to communicate in meaningful, whole acts. Although it is certainly important to focus learners' attention on linguistic elements, a literacy-based approach stresses the need to do this without glossing over or ignoring the interaction of contextual elements. Instead of progressing from micro to macro, a literacy-focused approach starts from the beginning with complete utterances and texts. These can be broken down and analyzed in terms of their component structures, but always with the 'big picture' and meaning relationships (both overt and covert) in mind.

Although there are many ways that whole texts can be used from the early stages of language learning (Kern 2000; Swaffar, Arens, and Byrnes 1991; Wallace 1992), we will consider

just two categories of activities—storytelling and projects—to illustrate the implementation of the goals and principles set forth above.

## Storytelling

Oral storytelling is a particularly good activity in beginning level courses. Teachers can gauge the complexity of their language to a level that they know their students will understand. Students follow the rhythm of the storyteller—whose gestures, facial expressions, and stress and intonation patterns help to clarify meaning—without worrying unduly about words they don't understand (situated practice). Storytelling is also a good way to involve advanced students in the curriculum, by having them visit first- and second-year classes to tell oral versions of stories they have read in their literature classes (transformed practice). This benefits the beginners in that they get to enjoy a preview of stories they will later read if they continue in their study of the language (recycling of texts), and they get plentiful (and enjoyable) listening comprehension practice. For the advanced students, the process of simplifying a complex narrative forces them to identify what they consider to be the essential elements of the story (these choices could be profitably compared among students if critical framing is a goal) and gives them practice in making their language comprehensible to beginners or intermediates—a particularly important experience for those students who eventually plan to teach the language.

Anokye (1994) offers further ideas suitable for those who have developed a basic competence in the language. She outlines three types of storytelling tasks: folktale, personal ancestor, and personal narrative. Each starts with an oral telling and leads to a written version. The first step is to discuss the questions: What is a story? Why do we tell them? and What makes a good story? (situated practice). Other key questions for students to think about include: To whom am I telling the story? What might the audience know or not know about the situation or culture surrounding the story? What background information might need to be explained? What do I intend for the audience to take away from the experience of hearing my story? (pp. 49-50).

The teacher tells a story first (one of the three types students will be telling), which is followed by a discussion of the story's meaning and implications as well as the similarities between storytelling and writing (critical framing). Anokye's ESL students then each tell a folktale from their own culture. This not only gives students extended speaking practice (situated practice), but also provides the listeners a chance to analyze and discuss the values, customs, and social conditions expressed in the story (critical framing). Anokye reports that this initial storytelling not only sensitizes learners to audience, purpose, explanation, illustration, and logic, but also leads to greater awareness and tolerance of cultural differences (critical framing).

The second story is about the 'furthest back' family ancestor about whom they can get information. The third is a traditional assignment of telling about a striking personal experience and how it affected them. All three storytellings can be used as prewriting activities in that after each telling, students discuss issues of audience, purpose, style, and so forth. Students can tape record their stories, transcribe them, and analyze the features they can identify in the oral narratives, such as repetition, pauses, fillers, use of coordination rather than subordination, etc. With the teacher's help they can then discuss ways in which a written version might overlap and where different lexical, syntactic, and organizational features might be needed (critical framing). A sample transcription is then transformed into a written version on the blackboard or on an overhead projector. Students can then transform their transcribed oral stories into written versions (transformed practice), drawing on the written narrative conventions brought out in the class discussion.

## Projects

We saw in the case of Cortese's class how literacy-based projects can benefit linguistic, cognitive, and social goals in language learning. Because literacy-focused language teaching emphasizes depth over breadth, individual and collaborative projects are particularly well suited, developing discourse competence and integrating various language skills. In the Appendix I have included three sample literacy-based projects for advanced-level learners, to give some flavor of the kinds of tasks that can be set for students in order to focus on relationships between language, texts, contexts and culture.

The first of these project ideas ("colonialism") explores the theme of colonialism as represented at various times and in various media and the effects that colonialism has had on many nations of the world. The goal is to get students asking questions about cultural influence and transformation, which prepares them for the second project. This project ("transmission and translation of culture") focuses on the ways that countries sharing a common language diverge and overlap culturally. Here the goal is to use texts as data to develop and test hypotheses, and to focus on the bases of interpretation. The third project ("crime") involves analysis of the representation (and construction) of social categories through language and the media.

Working backwards to earlier stages in the curriculum, themes appropriate for projects at the novice/intermediate stages of language learning are those most closely tied to the students' own experiences, such as home and family, school and/or work, leisure activities, food and drink, hobbies and interests, and so forth. As van Ek (1986) points out, such themes are very personal ones and so are socioculturally 'marked', revealing socio-cultural characteristics of the language community. Through written texts, students can compare how various members of the target culture talk and write about these same themes in their own language.

## Conclusion

If we want to best prepare our students for meaningful experiences in contexts of intercultural communication we must reassess our priorities in teaching foreign languages at the college and university level. What I have argued for in this paper is a focus on literacy as an organizing principle for foreign language curricula. This is not to suggest that spoken communication should be de-emphasized, but rather that it be broadly integrated with written communication, in order to address what Swaffar (1999) posits as the key question for foreign language education: "How do individuals and groups use words and other sign systems in context to intend, negotiate, and create meanings?" (p. 7).

Most foreign language curricula do a good job of getting students to speak, listen, read, and write the language (i.e., situated practice) in the early stages of foreign language learning. They tend to be less successful at getting students to learn to critically evaluate their own and others' language use—not from a prescriptive stance, but from a metacommunicative stance (critical framing). They tend to focus on language as a closed autonomous system, ignoring or downplaying (1) non-lexical and non-syntactic signification (e.g., silences, ellipses, formatting conventions, etc.) and (2) cross-cultural differences in genres and rhetorical notions and the assumptions that underlie them (e.g., what constitutes a 'cause', what constitutes an 'argument' in the two languages/cultures).

Texts—written, oral, visual, audio-visual—offer more than something to talk about (i.e., content for the sake of practicing language). They offer students the chance to position themselves in relation to distinct viewpoints and distinct cultures. They give students

the chance to make connections between grammar, discourse, and meaning, between language and content, between language and culture, and between another culture and their own. These connections are not easy to make, but they are essential, as I am learning from the students I am working with in an education abroad context. The more we can model the kinds of thinking that literacy demands the better we can prepare our students for the broadest range of language use and allow them to achieve their full communicative potential.

## Notes

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1. This classroom example highlights the benefit of reading and writing for speech, but Tannen (1983) shows that the interplay between written and oral communication works in the other direction as well—that so-called ‘oral’ discourse strategies may in fact be crucial to effective writing and reading:

Successful writing requires not the production of discourse with no sense of audience but, rather, the positing of a hypothetical reader and playing to the needs of that audience . . . the act of reading efficiently is often a matter not so much of decoding . . . but of discerning a familiar text structure, hypothesizing what information will be presented, and being ready for it when it comes. By making maximum use of context, good readers may be using oral strategies (p. 91).

2. The Standards’ separation of interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational modes may not correspond directly to a psycholinguistic reality any more than the separation of speaking, listening, reading, and writing do but they effectively highlight real social functions of academic language use and therefore lend themselves well to an integrative, literacy-based curriculum.
3. Obviously certain languages (e.g., Arabic, Chinese, Hindi/Urdu) demand a great deal more time than others for the development of basic abilities and automaticity—especially in reading and writing. Tasks involving critical framing and transformed practice therefore require especially careful planning in the less commonly taught languages so that student abilities can be realistically matched at any given level. Nevertheless, such tasks are crucially important in the development of advanced level proficiency in all languages.

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## Appendix

### Sample Literacy Project Ideas

The sample projects below illustrate how many different sources of information can be integrated around a central theme. The overriding goal of such projects is to get students to look

in several different ways at the culture under examination through texts. By seeing multiple perspectives on the same (or similar) events, information, or ideas, students can begin to acquire the tools needed to recognize the complex dynamics at work in the design of meaning. This approach invites multiple and contradictory interpretations for discussion, rather than suggesting a monolithic unified vision of the society under examination, in the hope that the sum of those multiple interpretations might ultimately more closely approximate the culture. Each of the three projects described below could be the central focus of a course, or embedded within the framework of an advanced level language-culture course. I am indebted to Ann Delehanty for helping me develop these project ideas.

### **Project 1: Colonialism**

*Goal:* To examine the effects of colonialism on the nations of the world. There is a huge body of literature, news media, and film on this subject. The instructor should try to focus on a very specific area so that students can get to know it well.

*Curricular components emphasized:* situated practice, critical framing.

*Procedure:*

1. A historical presentation of the time line of colonization can be presented first, along with any documents that might prove interesting. For example, in the case of the American continent (for ESL/EFL learners), one might begin by reading Christopher Columbus' diaries which contain his impressions of the sublime largeness of all things American; Native American or Aztec pictorial representations of the conquest; any of the late 18th century political documents debating and asserting American independence.

Students can compare initial impressions of the land/landscape to the 'realities' of that land/landscape. From there students might begin to discuss how myths were produced out of those impressions.

2. Students should choose which country or region they wish to focus on. They can look at the changes that took place in the region or country as a result of colonialism. Students can examine many 'objects' or attitudes that get transferred from one culture to another, such as music, clothing, customs, language, prejudices, illness (syphilis, AIDS, plagues), myth.
3. Students can ask themselves what kind of colonialism takes place today. Is it less or more overt than earlier colonialism? Some possible types of colonialism are:
  - Media (entertainment, news, publicity)
  - Corporate (multi-nationals, international finance)
  - Biological or scientific (availability of medication, bio-technology)
  - Military intervention
  - Literacy (availability of books)
  - Violence (weapons, arms transfers)
4. The research produced by the students' efforts can produce many different debates about the colonized subject or the colonized nation. The following are a few sample questions that might serve for a brief debate:
  - What is the colonized 'subject'? Does colonialism change everyone down to the level of the individual?
  - Are there fruitful comparisons to be made between a colonized subject of the past and figures of today?
  - What is the political model where colonialism is possible? How has today's model changed that, if at all?

- What steps can be taken or have been taken to resist colonialism?
- What kind of global society do we want?
- Should there be borders between nations? Do borders and nations merely encourage a colonialist model?
- How is national identity constructed? Should the nation's identity try to be empty of all outside influences?

## **Project 2: Transmission and Translation of Culture**

*Goal:* To look at several different sites where culture has been transferred between two different geographic locations (e.g., France and Cameroon, England and the U.S., Spain and Cuba, etc.). Students will look for influence in both directions. In many of these cases, the transmission happened under colonialism, so an understanding of colonialism (see Project 1 above) may be necessary to the project.

*Curricular components emphasized:* situated practice, critical framing.

*Procedure:*

1. Ask the students to list the various cultural objects that have been transmitted from culture to culture in the past (especially under colonialism). Also create a list of cultural objects that are being transmitted today (in an era supposedly free from colonialism).
2. Choose two countries for the students to examine. Teachers may wish to choose countries based on the kinds of resources they have available (e.g., newspapers, magazines, films, songs, etc.).
3. Below are some sample categories and questions that might be asked about each:

### **Media:**

Bring in newspaper articles, news clips or magazine articles from both countries (preferably covering the same story). Questions: How are events treated differently or similarly, both across and within the two cultures? How does the written language compare to the spoken language (i.e., is written Cameroonian French more similar to written 'standard' French than spoken Cameroonian French is to spoken Parisian French?).

Show a newscast from each country. Ask students to look at the different ways that images are presented (Are there pictures of dead bodies? Do the newspeople film extremely violent acts?). How is the story framed? Questions: What is the top story? What do the newscasters look like? How do their respective pronunciations of the language compare (Is there a standard pronunciation for this language?)?

### **Language:**

Show the students a film/video or play them a cassette representing the language as it is spoken in both countries. Be sure to ask the students to try to imitate both accents. Questions: What are the differences in speaking the different languages? What syllables get accented differently? How are questions and exclamations intoned? Are there any words that are specific to that country that don't exist in the other country? What idiomatic phrases are there?

### **Political Systems:**

Bring in a political document from each country (e.g., constitution, treaty, address by the president/prime minister, etc.—these are often available at national web sites). Compare

the rhetoric of each document. What are the stated goals of the document? Are the citizens of the country deemed to be equal participants, subjects, workers? What is the language of the document? Which country's system would you think is preferable? Why? Ask the students to do research about the political systems of each country. How are they historically linked? How have they diverged? If there was a revolution against the 'mother' country, how did it happen and what was the resultant political system in the former colony?

### **Music and Dance:**

Play a song from each country (e.g., a recording of a troubadour love song and a song by Julio Iglesias; a Kenyan pop song, e.g., by Daniel Owino Misiani and the Shirati Band; a piece by an American rap artist). Ask students to listen for the rhythm, lyrics and intonation of the singing. This subject has been covered at length with regard to Latin music's roots in Africa and Spain in the film "Routes of Rhythm" (58m, English and Spanish). Show a musical or a dance from each country. Ask students to note body posture, rhythm, dress, and dynamics between the sexes (if couples are dancing, who leads?). This topic is addressed in the film "Sex and Social Dance" (male and female roles in dance in Morocco, U.S., Polynesia: RM Arts, WNET/New York, 57m, English, French and Arabic).

### **Project 3: Crime**

*Goal:* Students investigate the different fictionalized approaches to crime upon which films, novels, and comic books depend. The project is meant to involve reading, watching, and writing. The cultural value of the project is that it can be expanded to research the mores of a society, answering questions such as: What is right? What is wrong? How is wrong punished? Where are moral lines drawn? Is crime subjective? and so forth. By focusing on a single social issue, students can become 'experts' on one aspect of the society. Ideally, they can take their findings to a cultural insider and have productive discussions about this controversial topic.

*Curricular components emphasized:* situated practice, critical framing, transformed practice.

*Possible Genres and Procedures:*

### **Newspaper/Media Sources:**

From real-life dramas, students can find answers to the following questions: What is criminal in the society being studied? How are those crimes prosecuted? What are the worst crimes? What crimes would not be criminal elsewhere?

Examining sensationalist media, students can discuss what kinds of crimes are considered shocking in this society. They can discuss the difference between transgression and criminality.

### **Justice System:**

If a constitution is available, students can read the constitution of this country. They can also study the structure of government in the country. All these structures determine what is deemed right and wrong. By looking at specific laws of the country, they might discover very illuminating cultural data (e.g., what would it mean for gum chewing in public to be outlawed?).

**Philosophy:**

If a philosophical text is available, students can look at the moral code as laid bare by a philosopher. Students can compare the philosopher's vision of society to the vision(s) represented in the popular media or by the justice system.

**Film:**

Film can take criminality to new levels by romanticizing or brutalizing it. Students can watch almost any film to find criminality and transgression. By focusing on the genre of film, students might begin to ask why we consider crime to be entertainment.

**Sample films in French:**

*Birgit Haas Must Be Killed* (Haynemann, 1981, 105m, French)

*Bob le Flambeur* (Melville, 1955, 102m, French)

*Buffet Froid* (Blier, 1979, 95m, French)

*Cat and Mouse* (Lelouch, 1975, 107m, French)

*Diabolique* (Clouzot, 1955, 107m, French)

*Elevator to the Gallows* (Malle, 1957, 87m, French)

**Writing:**

While the above items involve essentially critical framing, writing can be the principal vehicle for transformed practice. Throughout the semester, students could creatively apply the mores and attitudes explored above by writing an ongoing serial drama. This might take the form of a murder mystery, police drama, soap opera or detective novel. A group of students might wish to create a common body of characters and, from that, create a collection of episodes that combines the various adventures that students make up.