

## Some Thoughts on the First Two Years of Foreign Language Courses at the College Level

see p2 for 1st publication

**Domenico Maceri, Allan Hancock College**

First-year language courses at the college level include in their curriculum all "the basic structures" of the language, while second-year courses review these structures as well as expand the students' vocabularies and often introduce them to some aspects of literature. There are, of course, variations in terms of the number of hours and units for elementary and intermediate courses from college to college, but in general this description is an accurate one.

Since the 1960s, when many colleges dropped the foreign language requirement for graduation, some changes have been made to attract students back into the classroom. In this respect the biggest selling point has been that "speaking" started to be included in course descriptions. The rest of the curriculum remained virtually unchanged: emphasis on all the "basic structures" in the elementary courses, and on review in the intermediate ones.

There is no doubt that learning to speak the language is a primary objective as far as students are concerned. Most teachers recognize this and agree with the students. The problems are: how we achieve this goal, and how long will it take to achieve? We should be able to measure the achievement, objectively if possible, but at the very least by our students' satisfaction with their own progress. At the moment we accomplish neither. Not only do we rely much too heavily on written tests, but the number of students who continue their study of the language in the intermediate courses is very small indeed when compared with the enrollment in the first-year courses.

Perhaps the best indication that we do not achieve our goals in our elementary courses is demonstrated by the content of the intermediate levels. Here we "review" the first-year material, thus admitting openly that in the elementary courses we could not reach our goals and therefore must give it another try with the few die-hards we have left. Since we do not want to redo exactly the material of the previous year, we add some additional readings such as magazine or newspaper articles or some short stories. However, in essence, second-year courses simply repeat the work of the first year, hoping — usually without any basis — that this time it will work.

There is clearly too much material to be covered in our elementary courses given the one-year time span — hence the necessity to review it in the second year. Some colleges have bought themselves some extra time by increasing the number from the traditional three hours per week to four or even five. In addition, there is usually an extra hour spent in the lan-

guage laboratory. This extra time was supposed to give teachers the opportunity to teach speaking in addition to the other skills. But even with these changes we still do not manage to produce speakers of the foreign languages, and as a result, our intermediate sections are extremely small, since the majority of our elementary students have given up the study of the language.

The increase in the number of classroom and laboratory hours has probably brought about some positive results, but clearly more needs to be done. I believe that in teaching our first- and second-year language courses our guiding principle should be: Can the students use what we teach *orally* as well as in writing? We should be asking this question at the end of every chapter we cover. If the answer is no, then something is not right.

Considering the structure of the first- and second-year courses, I believe that we make too many claims about what we can teach. We need to be realistic about what we can deliver. In order to do this, we need to change the curricula of our first-year

courses so that they do not consist of a grammatical decathlon which we will repeat in the second-year courses for the very limited audience which will reach the finishing line. We need to reduce by *half* the "basic structures" of the beginning courses and present the rest in the intermediate levels. The additional time that we will thus "gain" will be used to insure that students can use *orally* as well as in writing the material taught. In this respect, oral tests must be given at least as much importance as written ones in determining students' grades. The review is to be done throughout the first two years, not simply in the second year.

If we make these changes in the curriculum, we will find that our intermediate sections will have many more students because they will have seen in the first year that they are really learning the language and will be encouraged to continue their study of it. We will find that our courses are no longer designed for readers of the foreign language but also for people who will write, understand, and most importantly speak it.

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SOME THOUGHTS ON THE FIRST TWO YEARS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE COURSES AT THE COLLEGE LEVEL

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The increase in the number of classroom and lab hours has probably brought about some positive results, but clearly more needs to be done. I believe that in teaching our first and second-year language courses our guiding principle should be: Can the students use what we teach orally as well as in writing? We should be asking this question at the end of every chapter we cover. If the answer is no, then something is not right.

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can deliver. In order to do this, we need to change curriculum of our first-year courses so that they do not consist of a grammatical decathlon which we will repeat in the second-year courses for the very limited audience which will reach the finishing line. We need to reduce by half the basic "structures" of the beginning courses and present the rest in the intermediate levels. The additional time that we will thus "gain" will be used to insure that students can use orally as well as in writing the material taught. In this respect, oral tests must be given at least as much importance as written ones in determining students' grades. The review is to be done throughout the first two years, not simply in the second year.

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