
Pro-Lingua/OSU

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Are We Prepared to Teach ALL Students?

Foreign languages, I recently heard a colleague lament, *were once at the center of the curriculum*. But were they, really?

True enough, until 1888, OSU required that all students complete two years of Greek, Latin, German, and English. The mandatory Greek requirement was dropped in 1888; Latin in 1911; and a foreign language requirement (not specifying the language) was dropped (except for the B.A. degree) in the period following WW II.

The conclusion within the profession is that the U.S. became increasingly pragmatic and Anglo-centric, devaluing the study of other languages and cultures. But did we contribute to the demise of language studies by refusing to recognize and adapt to changes that were taking place in education (K-16) since the middle of the nineteenth century?

Languages had indeed been at the center of the curriculum in high schools, colleges, and universities, but well into this century, those institutions remained elitist. In 1920, only 18% of the adult population in this country had graduated from high school; less than 3%, from college.

Mandatory secondary school education to age 16 did not really become a national reality until the 1930s, in part, to keep teenagers off the job market and, in part, in response to the needs of an increasingly industrial society. World War II rapidly transformed the U.S. from an agricultural to an industrial society; and both the need to serve that new society and a desire to keep veterans temporarily off the job market led to the G.I. Bill that, for the first time, opened the doors of higher education to tens of thousands of young men and women.

Despite our often proclaimed liberalism, the foreign language profession, however, remained elitist. A knowledge of other languages, literatures, and cultures was not for the common man, only for an intellectual elite.

Nothing better reveals that elitism than our *trickle up* approach to language studies. First- and

second-year courses, at both the high school and college levels, are *weed out* courses. Our argument is that, given economic realities, we need 30-40 students in a first-year class in order to justify offering a course for the five who will continue through fourth year. But if we were not elitist, if we really were interested in teaching **all** students, would we not consider reversing or eliminating the pyramid so that most (if not all) students would continue to a higher level?

The elitist mindset in academia was exacerbated during World War II, when the university joined forces with the federal government. The focus shifted away from undergraduate education to graduate studies and research. [Nothing more demoralizes many university faculty than to be perceived as members of a *service* department when, in fact, all undergraduate programs were once so perceived.]

Grammar, once viewed as a tool, evolved into structural analysis of language. Reading for appreciation and a general understanding of ideas (which had justified languages in the curriculum) evolved into literary criticism. The generalist was replaced by the specialist, and the specialist turned undergraduate education into a mini-graduate program. Only prospective teachers, especially prospective Ph.D.s, need consider studying a language beyond the second-year level. While we have said much about *foreign languages and careers* since the 1960s, our curricula are still primarily, and often exclusively, geared to prospective teachers.

Immediately following Sputnik (1957) and the Cuban Revolution (1958), the U.S. Congress invested millions of dollars in foreign language and international education. We need only read the political rhetoric to understand that what the federal government expected was for us to teach **all** students. Indeed, politicians spoke of the need to create a nation of bilingual adults, and the profession accepted the rhetoric but not its implications.

Throughout the 1960s, language teachers continued to focus their attention on those students who had the possibility of becoming language teachers. Is it any wonder that, by the early 1970s, hundreds of colleges and universities had dropped their foreign language entrance and exit requirements? At the same time that colleges and universities were opening their doors to a much greater percentage of students, foreign languages became the stumbling block to graduation for more and more of them. At OSU the issue was skirted, so to speak, by developing B.S. degrees in the College of Liberal Arts.

Is it any wonder that there was a taxpayer revolt against foreign languages in grades K-12, when the majority of students met with failure?

At both levels, we did not really want to teach all students.

True enough, we knew little about language acquisition. Most of us assumed that any student could learn a language in exactly the same way we did (however that was), and we dismissed those who did not as not being intelligent enough or not sufficiently motivated or lazy or whatever.

And then, we have long had to contend with a lock-step, seat-time system. Teaching all students, we argued, would lead to a *dumbing down* of the curriculum at the expense of the best and brightest students. Of course, we never seriously challenged the lock-step, seat-time system. We never asked the questions legislators and accreditation agencies are now forcing us to ask and answer; namely, *what do we expect students to know and be able to do? and how well?, and how will we assess whether or not they have met those standards other than using GPAs in required courses?* We resisted the need to seek other ways of teaching the best and the brightest, or of allowing them to move through the system faster.

Since the 1960s, research in a wide variety of disciplines has given us many more insights into the process of language acquisition. We now know there is a difference between language learning (theory of language) and language acquisition (the ability to perform in a cultural context), and that the two are not necessarily synonymous--any more than the art historian is necessarily a great artist, or that all great athletes can become great coaches, or that all great medical researchers are great surgeons. Social scientists involved in cross-cultural studies have described the *fluent fool*, individuals who can read, write and speak like educated natives, but who are never able to understand the cultural context of discourse (let alone non-verbal communication), and

who, like the Swede in Stephen Crane's *The Blue Hotel*, conclude that their failure to communicate in the foreign culture can only be attributed to a grand conspiracy against them.

We now have some evidence that there is such a thing as language aptitude which influences the ease with which individual students can learn or acquire a second language. We know something about individual learning styles and how they impact on language acquisition. We know that some languages require much more time to acquire than others. We have some evidence, even if much of it remains anecdotal, that students who are not likely to become applied linguists or literary scholars are more likely to be motivated (and, consequently, learn) if confronted with task-based, student-centered, rather than grammar-based, textbook-centered activities. We know that motivation is something a student can bring to a class and lose, or something which can be instilled by an instructor not responding or responding, respectively, to student interests, individual learning styles, age, and other factors.

Teaching all students, it turns out, is much more difficult and time-consuming than teaching only those who are our own mirror-images. But if we really want languages to be at the center of the curriculum, do we have a choice -- and particularly when we are public servants?

The impetus for language studies now comes to us not only from the federal government, but also business and industry. Oregon's Educational Reform Act of 1991 speaks of the need to teach a foreign language to all students. And the Oregon Educational Reform Act, like OSU's Mission Statement, places another demand on us: not only to be agents in reducing global tensions, but in reducing ethnic tensions in an increasingly multicultural state. Will we face another backlash if we are unwilling to teach all students; or, at least, to provide all students a real opportunity to study another language and its literature and culture beyond the elementary level?

Not all students can or will avail themselves of such an opportunity. There will always be those who see more value in a degree (i.e., a piece of paper) than the effort required to obtain it, and who will go *shopping* for easy courses. There will always be those who for personal reasons will have to make choices about how much time they can devote to language studies. With rapidly increasing tuition, there will be more students who will have to work 30-40 hours a week simply to remain in school. And given the imperative for life-long learning, we will face more and more adult learners who not only work

at a paying job full time, but have an additional obligation to children, spouse or parents. [But even many of these can be served by self-directed programs, rather than the seat-time classroom environment.]

Still, the *trickle-up* theory reigns supreme not only in most colleges and universities, but also in many secondary schools. Academic standards are geared to the best and brightest students, defined, invariably, by individual instructors.

The desire to teach only those who might replace us has now placed the profession in what can only be judged an unethical and immoral situation. In *Prospects for Faculty in the Arts and Sciences: A Study of Factors Affecting Demand and Supply, 1987 to 2012* (Princeton University Press, 1989), William G. Bowen and Julie Ann Sosa predicted a very rosy future for our profession. What they predicted, among other things: a) a much higher than usual retirement rate for humanities faculty between 1989 and 1998 [since most of us were hired during the post-Sputnik *boom* era]; b) increased enrollments in all foreign languages; and c) improved student-faculty ratios. What they did not foresee was a nationwide revolt against self-perpetuating graduate programs and research at the expense of undergraduate education; a nationwide reaction against the increased costs of higher education (which since the 1970s has consistently outpaced inflation); and prolonged economic recession in many parts of the country.

Likely as a result of the Bowen and Sosa study, data show that, since 1990-91, there has been an increasing number of students completing Ph.D.s in all foreign languages, at the same time that the number of jobs continues to decrease. In 1990-91, the last year for which data are available, an estimated 25% of the new Ph.D.s in Spanish (the one language still enjoying increasing enrollments) were unable to secure tenure-track positions; for several other languages, the figure was over 50%. And yet, more than one foreign language chair of a Ph.D.-granting department tacitly admits that graduate programs are being maintained by recruiting foreign nationals who subsequently cannot obtain employment! And many B.A.- and M.A.-granting departments still teach their undergraduate courses as if their sole justification is to produce future Ph.D.s!

For the same reasons, the shortage of secondary school foreign language teachers predicted by the Joint National Committee for Languages a decade ago has not materialized in most states. While foreign language enrollments in Oregon's public schools, for example, are at an all-time high,

the number of new, full-time positions has been few. As everywhere, budget realities have meant that existing teachers have had to teach more students.

Offering all students an opportunity to study a language for a longer period of time will indeed mean watering down the current language curriculum; it will mean that faculty will have to establish well-articulated or sequential goals to which all faculty subscribe, so that most students are not overwhelmed when they move from one level to the next, or when they take a course from another instructor.

In addition, it will also mean that faculty will have to seek new ways (other than seat-time requirements) of teaching the best students. There will have to be more attention given to self-directed study, assisted by faculty-developed interactive, multi-media materials; more attention given to one-on-one instruction in *Independent Study* and *Readings and Conference* courses; and more attention given to assessing actual proficiency (in language, literature and culture) rather than holding students to seat-time, credit-hour requirements. Increased productivity, demanded by the public, does not only mean teaching more students; it also means not penalizing the best students by requiring them to fulfill credit hour requirements if, in fact, they have already met proficiency standards. Considering that a majority of students now accumulate enormous debts in order to finish college, none should have to remain on campus one term longer than necessary in order to satisfy fragile faculty egos (the *but I can teach them so much more* that I have sometimes heard).

The end result, I suggest, is that many more students will gain a higher level of proficiency than they now do, and that more will view their language studies as a positive rather than a negative experience. It may also mean that many more students will discover the joy of reading for pleasure -- rather than viewing reading as a tedious and laborious chore to be avoided at all costs.

And that alone, I suggest is what will finally put languages at the center of the curriculum for all students, not just an elite few, and prevent a recurrence of the backlash that occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

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