Connecting Language to Content: Second Language Literature Instruction at the Intermediate Level

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Abtract: *Meaningfully integrating multidimensional approaches with learner-centered, workshop-style second language (L2) literature instruction at intermediate-level proficiency can help students increase their linguistic competence and further both their cultural understanding and analytical thinking skills. Moreover, the utilization of drama techniques and enactment strategies encourages students to form an interpretive community, to become more creative, and to apply their social, physical, and intellectual selves to L2 literature analysis. Concurrently, cross-cultural training exercises increase their understanding of the target culture. A carefully conceived literature-based curriculum takes students' linguistic development into consideration at all levels and, in view of a language department's financial viability in the corporate university environment, invariably leads to higher levels of student retention.*

Key words: *bridge between language and literature, critical thinking, experiential language learning, intercultural communication, second language (L2) reading*

Languages: *Relevant to all languages*

Why Teach L2 Literature at the Intermediate Level?

Post 9/11, both the necessity for more widespread foreign language proficiency and the notion that "the humanities become credos that confront us with real choices and decisions on how to act" in times of personal or collective tragedy (Showalter, 2003, p. 131) seem to go undisputed. Within the general context of foreign language education, the assertion that "literature teaches us to be human" (p. 135) therefore warrants renewed scrutiny of curricula and instructional methodology in second language (L2) undergraduate programs. If it is true that teaching literature helps students understand subtle differences in language use, recognize figurative language, appreciate metaphors and symbolism, identify underlying cultural assumptions, and, above all, learn how to think creatively and critically, why do so many language programs continue to lack institutional, and, indeed, public support? This paradox is especially puzzling when one considers that acquiring the ability to analyze literature in a foreign language would not only help develop critical thought but also enable graduates to provide deeper insights into the inner workings of other cultures.

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By integrating language with literature, L2 instructors can aspire to bridge the divide between the L2 language and literature curricula that continues to plague undergraduate and, by extension, graduate language programs (See Bernhardt, 1995; Davis, 2000; James, 2000; Murti, 1993). After succeeding in traditionally organized, textbook-based second year curricula, language students tend to find themselves unprepared to succeed in upper-level literature courses in which, according to Weist (2004), language is all too often relegated to the role of a mere tool, and where reading instruction and the teaching of literature are mutually exclusive. While Donato and Brooks (2004) conceded that several restructured programs exist that make use of language-based pedagogy in literature classes, they have identified the lack of pedagogical language training for professors of literature as one of the main reasons for the continuing language and literature (dis)connection. Since students analyzing L2 literature are still language learners lacking L2 vocabularies, achieving higher levels of proficiency and in-depth comprehension of literature is more easily said than done. Intermediate-level language students can describe and, as they progress, begin to make more complex statements, state opinions, and formulate hypotheses, but they cannot yet sustain communication at that level. Donato and Brooks (2004) therefore have called for greater articulation of the entire undergraduate program with a meaningful connection of language goals and literature instruction which would require both the language acquisition and the literature specialists within one department to share their knowledge.

Recently documented rises in language enrollments (MLA Newsletter, 2004) come at a time when colleges and universities are increasingly viewed as corporations, driven by considerations of efficiency, deliverability, and availability. Applying the corporate model turns teaching into production of education, and learning into consumption, while education management, rather than education, becomes the driving factor in academia (Edler, 2004). This model renders the delivery of communicative, performance-oriented subjects such as foreign languages and literatures, art, and music inefficient, and language and literature departments, already financially strapped, acquire the stigma of being expensive to maintain. In order to ally themselves with the more powerful non-humanities-oriented schools and colleges on campus, many language programs pin their survival hopes on offering language and culture courses for professional purposes, offerings they generally develop in addition to traditional literature classes for their majors. If, however, professional students are subsequently exempted from taking literature classes, they are excluded from the larger community of language learners. Not encouraging them to participate not only prevents them from making deeper connections and comparisons to the target culture communities, but denies the role afforded literature in a standards-based L2 curriculum (Phillips, 1999) and does nothing to alleviate the language–literature divide in L2 curricula. Furthermore, in view of the increasingly commercially oriented, consumerist attitudes towards education, schools and colleges need to be innovative in educating their students. According to Allen (2002), it is indeed the academics' responsibility to continue voicing social criticism and dissent, despite the educational system's dependency on the corporate and political world for financing. The teacher's role is to educate students to become critical consumers of their own culture, and in the case of the foreign language student, also the L2 culture. By encouraging students to become analytical thinkers in an L2 as well as their own, teachers prepare them to develop unique cultural insights and also to detect overt and covert stereotyping in the narratives of the dominant culture. Through literature, teachers both appeal to their students' imagination and intellect and encourage them to develop their own counter-models to corporate and other

dominant examples. They consequently undertake what storytellers have accomplished for millennia: The gentle subversion of prevalent values within the accepted parameters and socially sanctioned environments of the dominant society.

Reading for Communication in L2

Proponents of reader-response theories (Fish, 1980; Iser, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1995) demonstrate that readers respond individually to the literary texts. During the reading process they encounter gaps in the text which affect them and compel them to access their own knowledge base to create meaning on both a conscious and subconscious level. Because they feel the need to explain the gaps in the texts, reading becomes an action, and readers become active makers of meaning. In order to train students to focus on meaning rather than form and employ reading strategies such as contextual guessing and hypothesizing when reading longer texts, Moffit (1998) argued for the inclusion of books for children and young adults into the L2 classroom.

According to Gardner's (1983, 1999) theory of multiple intelligences, every learner uses divergent skills and strategies to acquire the material taught. Nevertheless, traditional textbooks are still predicated upon a "one-size-fits-all" approach to language instruction and tie grammatical competency and form to literary and expository texts. Almost by default, resulting classroom instruction tends to be more teacher centered, text driven, and content based, where the topics under discussion stand in direct relation to the grammatical dictates of a given chapter rather than further communication. Designing the second-year college curriculum around authentic literary texts instead of a textbook, therefore, has deep-seated implications for language pedagogy and material selections. A literature-based curriculum does not preclude structural practice. On the contrary, it contributes greatly to oral and written language acquisition, since literacy leans heavily on

students' oral language development, and oral language in turn provides the foundation for reading and writing. Such curricular changes also presume multiple in-class and out-of-class readings thus and require that students employ both extensive and intensive reading techniques to make sense of the narratives. For literature-based classes in the students' native language and English as a second language (ESL) classes, Hadaway, Vardell, and Young (2002) have observed that rich oral language experiences result in well-developed vocabularies, promote conceptual understanding, and expand the knowledge of language structures.

As a first step, preparing students to read in an L2 must also include their becoming aware of the strategies they employ when reading in their L1. Swaffar's (2002) research into L2 reading has revealed that students' difficulties with target language literature also stem from practices they unconsciously apply from their L1 reading, where they often tend to read for details that support model interpretations. She concluded that it is therefore essential to enable students to delve into literary interpretation by asking them to identify a story's global patterns and consistent narrative structures. Moreover, by making students aware that most writers of European languages express their dominant themes in the first few paragraphs, either directly or implicitly, reading for such clues becomes a matter of practice and will provide the students with a key to the text's interpretation. Katz (2002) conceded that the instructor must make L2 readers aware of grammatical and lexical structures that may impede comprehension and suggested that structured input at the prereading phase provides appropriate frames of reference, draws attention to text organization, and assists students in following the plot. Postreading, output-oriented activities, on the other hand, require students to have conducted close readings of the text in order "to support the hypotheses that they have constructed in the input sections"

and finally "communicate at the discourse-level, which assumes their having grasped the elements in the text that distinguish it as a work of literature" (p. 160).

Furthermore, as Bernhardt (2002) asserted, students read target language literature from an incomplete knowledge base, which is also grammatically, linguistically, and conceptually inaccurate simply because the literature is foreign. In much the same way that Swaffar (2002) has posited for reader preparation in the students' first language (L1), Bernhardt argued that the readers' L1 knowledge base is an equally salient factor in the construction of meaning from the L2 text. Since student–readers are learners, they rely on prior knowledge, in-class feedback, and classroom context to construct their textual understanding. She therefore relegates the task of uncovering students' potentially skewed conceptual representations to the listening instructor, who realigns them if necessary. Viewed superficially, the assertions of Bernhardt, Katz, and Swaffar could conceivably counteract the stance taken by reader–response theorists that teachers should not provide readymade interpretations. Input and output activities as well as correcting inaccurate conceptual representations could certainly guide students to a specific interpretive outcome. However, once students have understood how a given literary work is structured and have developed an accurate conceptual framework, they can interact with the text in greater depth. Instead of preformulated questions and a literature class in which the teacher is the possessor of knowledge, teacher-centered instruction is replaced by creative assignments, peer evaluations, and cooperative tasks which rely on the students' own interaction with the text and relegate the teacher to the role of enabler or coordinator of the interpretive process.

Since discussions generated in this type of workshop-style classroom allow for considerable variations in responses, they are conducive to accommodating multiple levels of linguistic ability and learner types among the class participants. While students quickly understand that not every response is appropriate or valid and that the meaning of a given text is not entirely subjective, they also acknowledge that there is no single, fixed meaning—a premise not easily accepted by those accustomed to multiple-choice tests and text-based testing, which assume there is only one correct answer. Moreover, learners realize that they arrive at a conclusion through experimentation and argumentation with other members of the classroom community, by accessing their own and one another's knowledge bases and consciously employing reading strategies. Since "reader–response theory suggests that student voice is essential to learning from literature in both a literal and a figurative sense" (Cox & Boyd-Batstone, 1997, p. 41), students' responses to texts become the starting point for further discussion rather than being the ending point, as usually happens in text-based literature classes.

Creating a (Language) Learning Community in the Literature Classroom

The very nature of communicative language instruction generally requires students to react rapidly in their public voice from the beginning, rather than develop thoughts and ideas before speaking. In fact, by being prompted to communicate orally, students are asked to risk an educated guess or venture into unfamiliar linguistic territory, which can be a potentially stressful undertaking. Although they use their inner voice to prepare for outer voice communication in their L1, language students are usually not encouraged to cultivate an inner voice in their L2. Tomlinson (2000, 2001) therefore has suggested that instructors train students to use their inner voice as part of their target language communication and advised postponing language production activities and providing exercises or projects, thereby encouraging learners to talk to themselves before communicating with others. This approach, of course, routinely requires silence in the language classroom—a con-

cept that makes many language instructors intensely uncomfortable.

Asking students to produce interpretations and react orally to their reading seems to contradict Krashen's (1985) perception of the importance of a low-anxiety class atmosphere, without which language learning and confident, student-response-centered communication will not occur. If we agree with Krashen that the students' target language acquisition emerges from their own experiences within the context of meaningful, useful, and natural language input, workshop-style instruction where the teacher is an active listener and facilitator creates the relaxed atmosphere necessary to promote risk taking. Taking Krashen's notion one step further, and focusing on comprehensible output, Swain's (2000) research revealed that input-rich, communicative classroom interaction alone does not lead to L2 fluency. She argued that providing learners with opportunities to use language and skills they have acquired, at a level at which they are competent, is almost as important for comprehension and production as giving students appropriate levels of input. In observing the role of collaborative assignments, Swain (2001) also noted that learners use their output to test accuracy in their L2, regardless of their proficiency level. She found that peer collaboration leads students to notice gaps in their linguistic knowledge, reflect on form, formulate and test hypotheses, and seek solutions by relying on their joint linguistic resources. Swain, like Donato and Brooks (2004), concluded that language instruction must be integrated systematically into content.

Supportive and collaborative instruction also lends credence to Vygotsky's (1962) research on the relevance of social context to the individual's role in language acquisition. Consequently, given the intermediate students' propensity to talk and write about themselves, storytelling activities and group-based narrative analyses strengthen a sense of community, and trying out unfamiliar linguistic structures

or abstract concepts turns into an interesting, but low-stress experiment. In fact, one could argue that the traditional, text-centered approach to literature classes tends to promote—rather than alleviate—students' fears of communicating their observations and reactions, because teacher-generated questions test knowledge and preconceived interpretations of the text itself.

Since workshop-style classroom instruction values student-initiated analysis over teacher-led instruction, students begin to take control of their interactions with a given literary text and become comfortable making judgments. Resulting instructional approaches, such as creating literature circles, encouraging journal keeping, forming peer writing groups, and preparing role-plays, foster the building of a community of learners. Likewise, such activities promote open-ended discussions that the teacher merely facilitates. Interaction with a text also includes intense, detail-oriented close readings and moves class discussions beyond personal reactions and interpretations. As a result, students make deeper connections with the texts they have read and tend to be more tolerant of divergent opinions and interpretations. Finally, because they learn to recognize how they themselves form their own arguments, they are better prepared to react to their classmates' assertions and thus become critical readers. In short, basing teaching principles on reader–response theories and embedding them in multidimensional instructional approaches helps establish a workshop-style classroom atmosphere in which communal learning and literature-based instruction thrive.

Communicative Activities and Critical Thinking

The basic tenets of readers' theater and enactment strategies move classroom discussion away from traditional text-based and teacher-centered inquiries. By encouraging less controlled modes of L2 interaction, they support and complement—rather than undermine—communicative and pro-

ficiency-oriented teaching methodologies. Short of mounting a full-scale L2 theatrical production with all of its linguistic benefits (see Ryan-Scheutz & Colangelo, 2004), a typical readers' theater activity at the intermediate level has students participate in literature-based, read-aloud sessions, which encourage oral interpretation by individual course participants and are subsequently accepted or modified by the entire class or group. As such exercises use "voice to produce mental images of characters and scenes" (Bosma, 1992, p. 89), they also hone oral and aural communication skills.

Doubtlessly, the mere idea of performing in front of classmates can raise the shyer student's affective filter and, in the worst-case scenario, result in non-participation. The concept of readers' theater should therefore be introduced to the class using a variety of low-stress activities (for suggestions, see Walker, 1996). It is easiest to work with a dialogue from a short story or novel, or a scene from a drama. Nevertheless, with some scripting, narrative texts can be interpreted as effectively. Readers' theater activities differ considerably from role-plays based on students' scripts or notes, since they are the result of creative interaction with a given literary text and result in communicating personal interpretations and analyses. For example, in an intermediate German curriculum, L2 students are introduced to literary analysis through a children's book (Maar, 1996) which was written for young Germans to help them understand their foreign classmates. On 48 pages, which include some illustrations, students follow the story of Steffi and Aischa, a German and a Lebanese girl, whose growing friendship weathers cultural misunderstandings. The story offers models for identification, but no clear-cut solutions to the problems presented. After having read the book or a segment of it, students pick a scene containing a conflict. One example is the German parents' annoyance that their Lebanese guests, Aischa and her brother, politely refuse to eat the grilled sausages offered. Since the author does not explain that Muslims do not eat pork, the students have to present an interpretation. Producing the script then is a result of cooperative interaction and interpretation. When reading or performing their scripts, the students endeavor to instruct, persuade, and even entertain the rest of the classroom community. Interacting with literary texts in this manner in lower-level language classes already ensures oral, aural, and written practice, all the while encouraging students to fill in the gaps in the narrative. According to Ratcliff (1999), the basic principle of readers' theater "is to provide a creative stimulus for the student who may be unaccustomed to using imagination to interpret literature" (p. 3). Consequently, the reluctant L2 reader tends to develop more self-confidence, as the repetitive aspect of readers' theater reinforces comprehension, pronunciation, and vocabulary retention.

Readers' theater can also prepare intermediate students for a variety of enactment activities, which not only vary the instructional pace, but also effectively facilitate the acquisition of the material and the interpretation of the text. Since interacting with the literary text and enacting it is participatory social learning, a soundly functioning, cooperative, and supportive classroom community is the necessary prerequisite for employing such techniques. In contrast to the scripted readers' theater parts, role-plays based on the descriptions of certain literary characters or their actions rely on some in-class brainstorming and key words, rather than entirely scripted sentences, and hence promote extemporaneous oral communication. A role-playing technique Wilhelm termed "hotseating" (2002, p. 82) is an especially dynamic and effective way of tying final interpretations together. In small groups, students brainstorm about types of questions they could ask of various characters in the literary text and plan methods of evaluating their peers' responses. After the conclusion of a reading, individual students volunteer to take on the role of one of the literary characters

and sit "in the hotseat," which is in the middle of the class or their groups. They answer questions about "their" character's actions and motivations. Thus, as in the example from the German children's book, if the student in the hot seat has taken on the role of Aischa, he or she could be asked why Aischa refused to eat the sausages and why she did not explain her refusal to Steffi's parents. Here, unlike the readers' theater scripts, which have been well thought out prior to presentation, students are required to think and react spontaneously to their classmates' comments. They are thus invited to connect the character's situation to wider concerns presented in the text. As with all types of role-playing, hotseating allows students to take on a persona and explore ideas and experiment with interpretations in the safety of a role. This enactment technique is especially effective at the intermediate level, as it provides students with the opportunity to practice interview techniques and formulate questions—incidentally, the linguistic function that the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview tests to determine intermediate-level proficiency (Breiner-Sanders, Lowe, Miles, & Swender, 2000, p. 16). However, because they are also asked to analyze, elaborate, and convince their classmates, they are beginning to move from intermediate-level language functions to advanced-level ones.

Cross-Cultural Communication Through Literature

Current textbooks and resource manuals for multicultural education (Day, 1999; Valdéz, 1998; Willis, 1998) are predicated upon the belief that literary texts are cultural artifacts which yield valuable insights into the behavior and customs of divergent communities and that reading them ultimately leads to empathy with and greater understanding of representatives of the other culture. Directly experiencing another culture, however, involves both affective and cognitive dimensions of the personality. Being confronted with divergent cultural contexts can be either unsettling or invigorating, depending on the reader's attitude. Furnham and Bochner (1989) have defined culture shock as intense emotional response to transition, loss, or change and they stated that interactions with representatives from other cultures can create anxiety, and in extreme cases, fear and loathing. Bennett (1998) asserted that intercultural sensitivity and understanding develops in several distinct stages and unfurls from a variety of ethnocentric and simplistic interpretations of the other culture to several multifaceted ethnorelative assessments, at which point the individuals have become comfortable with a variety of cultural differences, have the ability to adapt their judgments, and enjoy exploring cultural differences (Bennett, 1998).

Although tourists also experience culture shock, Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001) stated that theirs is mitigated by the excitement of travel, and much like tourists, most language learners experience the other culture voluntarily. Nevertheless, the inability to communicate in language classrooms operating exclusively in the L2 can produce intense feelings of unease. Similarly, awareness of a given text's cultural otherness may elicit strongly emotional responses. It is therefore entirely possible that language students find themselves experiencing culture shock in one form or another. In fact, when discussing the German children's book, students tend to voice disappointment or even outrage at Steffi's reaction to Aischa's brother and frequently make simplistic, generalized ethnocentric judgments about Germans and their treatment of foreigners. If, as Byram and Esarte-Saries (1991) have stated, students seek cultural awareness and deeper understanding of the target culture, they need to become ethnographers. By learning to take on the viewpoint of an outsider, they will gain appreciation for the exploratory freedom such a stance allows them. This means, however, that the students should be encouraged to consciously experience both their pleasurable and unsettling reactions to the cultural differences presented

to them through the text. At this point, the instructor has to make the students question their reactions and emotions and confront them with their own stereotypes, so they can move towards an ethnorelative rather than ethnocentric assessment of cultural differences.

The fields of cross-cultural communication and ethnography offer L2 instructors rich source material for cultural awareness training, which helps their students question their self-perceptions, attitudes, and even their behavior (Brislin, 1993; Juffer, 1993; Summerfield, 1997). Easily adaptable simulation games (Thiagarajan, 1990), role-plays (Hofstede, Pedersen, & Hofstede, 2002), and video-based assignments (Summerfield, 1993) train students to identify and react to common issues and pitfalls in intercultural communication and also provide them with ways of identifying their own reactions within the parameters of culture shock to find ways of resolving what they might find unsettling about the L2 narrative they are analyzing. Powers (1999) has found that simulation games lead students to accept that their judgments are biased and influenced by stereotypes, and they subsequently come to understand that differences and diversity are not synonymous with problems and difficulties. In fact, enactment strategies and cross-cultural awareness-raising activities can also challenge deep-seated stereotypes that the readers already have or that they may develop in the course of interaction with a text; and, as Bernhardt (2002) has stated, such exercises further encourage students to adjust their conceptual understanding of a text through their own critical thought processes.

Conclusion

A workshop-style stand-alone literature course lacking overall curricular articulation cannot produce the desired outcomes of having students learn to analyze L2 texts and move towards advanced-level proficiency. Such a course will also not bridge the infamous language–literature gap. In order to achieve comprehension,

further proficiency, and hone critical thinking skills, students need to be accustomed to working in interpretive communities and resolving linguistic as well as content issues collaboratively throughout. For the college-level curriculum, this means moving away from a textbook-based second year to a cultural-studies-and-literature-based course structure, which contextualizes grammar instruction within literary and other content discussions.

One example of a German curriculum restructured in this way follows: The first few weeks of the third-semester sequence begins with a children's book (Maar, 1996) and then moves on to short stories written for young adults (Kordon, 1999). Written around pivotal years in a century of German history, each story describes the lives of one adolescent resident of Berlin, thus contextualizing important events in German history through literature. Simultaneously, students read autobiographical texts (Lixl-Purcell, 1991), which provide both personal narratives and the sociohistorical context for Kordon's stories. The conflicts laid out in Kordon's texts (i.e., sending a young boy to a bar to retrieve a belligerent, drunk, and recently unemployed father before World War I, or debating whether or not to leave East Germany and family members before the border is closed), as well as their open endings compel the students to begin formulating their first hypotheses, despite struggling with the language, and during the course of the second year, students become ever more confident as they move towards communicating at advanced-level proficiency. Just as Swain (2001) has observed for French immersion classes, students in the reconstituted German curriculum not only use their incomplete linguistic knowledge to hypothesize about the story's content but also work in groups on more accurate output. Simultaneously, the sociohistorical context, provided through the autobiographical readings which cover the same time periods as Kordon's stories, allows the students to position texts within a larger cultural context. Incidentally, those students who are pursu-

ing language study for professional purposes find the cultural studies approach to literature especially meaningful.[1] Awareness of a given work's genre-specific structure and their familiarity with workshop-style discussions thus enables students at the third year level to interact creatively and critically with a novel that delves into the questions about Germany's Nazi past, generational conflicts, guilt, innocence, and justice (Schlink, 1997). Because they have learned to approach literature from a cultural studies perspective, students have acquired the wherewithal to position the novel into overriding discussions about the politics of memory in postwar Germany, the Holocaust, and Cold War politics. Hotseating characters from this book helps the students realize that clear-cut answers are not possible, nor is the author prepared to guide readers in that direction. Most of all, though, literature no longer intimidates them, and the students continue their language studies.

The underlying assumption for workshop-style literature courses is that students are no longer learning about the language by using it to learn about content, but rather learning about the target culture and literature in and through the language. With the teacher as an active listener, they are encouraged to function as problem solvers, not merely receivers of information. By also assuming that some form of culture shock will occur in the L2 classroom applying an integrated, multidimensional approach that includes cultural awareness raising, the instructor ensures that ongoing linguistic progress and creative language use are reconciled with the development of analytical and interpretive skills. If the overall curriculum is carefully conceived, L2 literature plays an essential role in avoiding a tourist view of the target culture because it offers culturally authentic information and the opportunity to try to understand an event or character through the target-culture lens. By gradually preparing intermediate-level L2 students to embark on complex and abstract discussions, such classes succeed in demonstrat-

ing that literature is "not cleanly detached from the world, but messily entangled with it" (Showalter, 2003, p. 140). Once students have found ways to understand L2 literature and culture by applying their own social, physical, and intellectual experiences, they have bridged the infamous language–literature gap for themselves. In view of the continuing shortfalls in legislative funding for higher education, modern language departments are challenged to retain more students in their upper-level courses. As interest in languages seems to be growing once again, and since universities are also—as Allen (2002) stated—duty-bound to remind the public of investing in the nation's future, modern language departments have the unique opportunity to take on a leadership role within their respective institutions and educate critical interpreters of their own and L2 cultures.

Acknowledgments

Notes
1. The higher retention rate for students whose primary majors are Business, Economics, Engineering, or in the sciences, since the intermediate curriculum was restructured corroborates oral testimonies about the perceived relevance of the course material.

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