

# The Changing Face of the Intermediate Language Curriculum<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *Foreign language departments in institutions of higher education historically have faced a dilemma in formulating their intermediate curricula: How can they balance the needs of students completing language requirements with the needs of students preparing for advanced language or literature studies? This article calls for instructors and departments to pioneer in changing the intermediate language curriculum. The article represents an appeal for action and lays out guiding principles for change. The article will first examine today's foreign language teaching climate, especially as it affects the intermediate curriculum in higher education. It will then propose and explicate five curriculum guidelines that, when used together, meet the challenges posed by a changing academic environment.*

## Introduction

Faced with the challenge of striking a balance between institutional language requirements and preparation for more advanced language and literature studies, faculty and students alike have often viewed the intermediate curriculum as the ugly stepsister. Faculty find that the magic of the elementary level has faded; students face detailed review and refinement of familiar material that they thought they had already mastered. Performance at the intermediate level, whether it be written or oral communication, demands what Harlow and Muyskens (1994) call "active usage," rather than mere coverage or exposure to material (141). Students frequently find the accurate performance required at this level daunting. Faced with genuine challenges, the faculty responsible for the intermediate curriculum must constantly reexamine its program to meet the changing needs of their institutions and students.

This article represents an appeal to departments and instructors for action at the intermediate level and lays out guiding principles for change. The article will first examine today's foreign language teaching climate, especially as it affects the intermediate curriculum in higher education. It will then propose and explicate five curriculum guidelines that, when used together, meet the challenges posed by a changing academic environment.

Throughout this article, the term "intermediate curriculum" will refer to the basic third- and fourth-semester courses that immediately follow the two-semester elementary program. The intermediate curriculum may also include an intensive block program in which two semesters of material are covered in a single semester. The intermediate block courses in French, Spanish, and Italian at Washington University are one such example. The intermediate curriculum constitutes an essential, often required, step in higher education language programs. Whether in the one- or two-semester format, intermediate courses are usually prerequisites for all advanced courses, such as composition, stylistics, and literature surveys. "Intermediate curriculum" in this article, however, will exclude ancillary conversation or survival language courses that are not

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part of a department's regular course sequence.

### Changing Features of the Intermediate Curriculum

Students themselves are, of course, increasingly diverse in background, motivation, and needs. Many intermediate language students study language for reasons not encountered before. Students' language backgrounds and levels of preparation are remarkably varied. The *New York Times* (Zeller 1999) recently reported, for example, that 49% of the undergraduates in the City University of New York system come from language backgrounds other than English. Students from non-English language backgrounds may be motivated to study language because of family heritage, bringing some oral skills to their study. Some students pursue a personal interest in travel or study abroad. A number of students place into the intermediate level from innovative high school programs that valorize a communicative, student-centered learning environment. Conversely, others come from backgrounds where communication in the target language is not emphasized. Yet another group of students views language study as a tool for studies or careers in international politics, global environmental issues, health care, and business, to name but a few. They expect institutions to offer courses to meet their special needs. Among this wide range of students, motivation varies as much as the population. Forging an effective classroom community is one of the major challenges for intermediate instructors.

The instructor population has also grown more diverse. In his introduction to *¿Que Te Parece?*, an intermediate Spanish program, Lee (1996) comments on the diversity of the intermediate instructional staff, ranging from new graduate teaching assistants to tenured professors. Some instructors are interested in innovative approaches and materials, whereas others are tradition-bound, indifferent if not resistant to change. Many teach intermediate language courses as a service but would prefer to teach their "specialities" or elementary language, where student enthusiasm is often high and progress appears rapid. As at some other institutions, the intermediate level at Washington University also functions as one of the primary teacher training grounds for graduate students. New Teaching Assistants (TAs) at the intermediate level frequently bring gusto, energy, and innate skill to the classroom, but they may also lack pedagogical knowledge and experience. The mixture of teaching staff recognized by Lee (1996) echoes the growing diversity of students typical of the intermediate level.

Another change lies in the arena of intermediate language pedagogy and curriculum. In the early 1980s, Rava (1983) advocated an intermediate curriculum with multiple objectives. Her proposed goals, however, revolved around grammar review with some introduction of canon-

ical literary pieces in preparation for the literature major or minor. Instead, a focus on the learner, on communication, and on culture influences contemporary pedagogical thinking. For instance, the French text *Quant a moi* encompasses a rich pattern of today's intermediate pedagogical objectives. Bragger and Rice (1996) contend that their programs will "[1] refine your listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills; [2] provide you with strategies that allow you to communicate more effectively; [3] help you review previously learned grammatical structures and acquire new structures and uses; [4] give you a better understanding of French and Francophone culture" (xi). Implied in this simple statement are the pedagogical theories that infuse many integrated yet complex intermediate programs. These expansive and ambitious goals also indicate the problematic aspect of the intermediate curriculum, that is, the question of how to meet various needs and combine an array of materials and practice effectively.

The first goal of *Quant a moi* (1996), for instance, reflects the four skill categories typical of a proficiency perspective as presented in the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* (1986). Oxford (1990) spearheaded research on the language learning strategies advocated in the second goal. Recent studies, such as Vandergrift's (1997) investigation of receptive strategies in listening, furthered understanding of how students learn. The third goal stresses the need for accurate grammar usage. The fourth emphasizes the 1990s' emphasis on culture. Kramsch (1993) combines the theoretical bases for culture as a form of context with practical considerations, stating that "Systematic training of learners in insiders' and outsiders' views of cultural phenomena should start early on with activities that require learners to adopt different ways of seeing" (229). The National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project (*Standards* 1996) also includes culture in the "five Cs," the central notions of the document. The theoretical underpinnings of Bragger and Rice's textbook (1996) exemplify broad curricular changes on many fronts.

Finally, the most important change in the intermediate language curriculum is the burgeoning role of technology. Everyone recognizes its impact on everyday life. Its impact on foreign language education is already profound. In summarizing the potential of technology for language instruction, Cubillos (1998) cites eight areas in which well-chosen technological materials can augment teaching effectiveness. The areas include students' vocabulary acquisition and exploration of the foreign language culture, as well as instructors' increased understanding of second language acquisition. Even though Bragger and Rice (1996) do not specify the use of technology for meeting their four goals, their program offers audiotapes, videotapes, and cross-referencing to *Systeme-D Writing Assistant Software*. In 2000, a new edition will feature CD-ROMs with the

potential to increase authentic cultural input, provide review exercises in both grammar and vocabulary, and help students develop cross-cultural research and analytic skills in ways undreamed of a decade ago.

Confronted with the challenge of these four changes, how should we develop the intermediate curriculum of the 21st century? Surely, changes as radical as technology, student and instructor diversity, and learner-centered, communicative approaches demand our response.

### A Vision for the Intermediate Curriculum

Situated at the pivotal point between basic, often required, language courses and advanced, specialized courses, the intermediate curriculum is poised to embrace the broad educational changes just enumerated. Thus, Washington University envisages its future internationally; across the schools and departments of the university, programs are becoming increasingly connected to the rest of the world. For example, the John M. Olin School of Business has begun a semester internship in France. Within this framework, languages as a door to communication and to understanding other cultures are crucial for students in every division of the university. In such a receptive atmosphere, faculty members should seize the opportunity to underline and publicize their own expertise and experience as language, culture, and literature educators. They should show their willingness to address changes in student and instructor populations, and in pedagogical theory marked by technology. Faculty should fashion the intermediate curriculum accordingly. The intermediate curriculum should therefore cast a wide net by being as broad-based and nonspecialized as possible. The wide-net notion emphasizes the pivotal role of the intermediate curriculum that is at one and the same time doorway, terminus, and all points along the way. In other words, the intermediate curriculum should reach in many directions while preserving rigorous standards for language learning.

Experts are already examining facets of the intermediate curriculum. Kulick and Mather (1993), for example, propose the introduction of the Francophone world at the intermediate level through student research into Francophone regions. Lyman-Hager (1994) suggests systematic usage of video and interactive video and makes a strong case for “modern technology enhanced classrooms” (223). As mentioned, Harlow and Muyskens (1994) and Vandergrift (1997) have concentrated on analysis and research about the intermediate level. Other curricular specialists still espouse the conversation–composition approach as a “mainstay of the foreign language curriculum” (Davidheiser et al. 1995, 274). Half a dozen graduate students in language pedagogy at Washington University have recently created extensive units for intermediate French, Spanish, and Italian classes. These incorporate

new thinking and materials, many drawn from Internet resources. The intermediate curriculum then has captured the attention of language pedagogues, technology advocates, and classroom practitioners.

### Five Guidelines

Drawing on the cited experts and others, and on my own past experience and future plans for the intermediate curriculum, I offer five guidelines designed to respond to the marked changes in the language teaching environment. The intermediate curriculum should:

- *be as rigorous as possible;*
- *integrate language forms into course content;*
- *use authentic cultural material delivered through as many resources as possible;*
- *incorporate contemporary multimedia supports and material;*
- *consider the classroom as a community for communicative, student-centered activity.*

The five guidelines build on elementary level teaching materials and approaches that combine basic language forms and meaningful context. But they advance beyond the carefully structured and guided exercises and activities of the elementary level. The five guidelines for the intermediate level help close the gap between elementary level “coverage” and intermediate level assimilation of authentic materials and language forms for accurate, independent performance (Harlow and Muyskens 1994, 141). The guidelines suggest extensive and varied practice in expression and comprehension. Through content-rich lessons that progress to quite complex communicative tasks, this curriculum should prepare students for advanced level courses, including the common composition–conversation or literature survey courses. In this fashion, the intermediate curriculum builds on what precedes it and readies students for what follows, forming a smooth transition between levels.

In short, the intermediate curriculum refines language skills acquired at the elementary level; recycles them in longer discourse units; expands vocabulary significantly; and moves to longer, authentic cultural input samples.

The *rigor* proposal is a bit like apple pie — it suits everyone’s taste! Yet the difficulty lies in its implementation, especially in a program with a diverse audience and multiple objectives. My approach to implementation is three-pronged.

First, credit units and contact hours matter in meeting the broad but ambitious goals of the intermediate curriculum. The more often a course meets, the more opportunities arise for developing communicative skills, and the greater the potential for rapid language acquisition. In my experience, a course with high credit and contact hours

actively engages students' attention both in the classroom and in homework. Rigor demands teaching students for the maximum number of credit and contact hours an institution deems feasible.

The next factor with regard to rigor is academic expectations. As mentioned, the intermediate course ought to aim for exit performance in the intermediate-low to intermediate-mid range as defined by the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* (1986), for example, in all four skills. Performance levels will, of course, vary depending on the target language. Tschirner and Heilenman (1998) clarify the variables in oral proficiency ratings at the end of the fourth semester including the difficulty of the target language and student background. At the same time, expectations should encompass the five "C" organizing principles of the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (1996): communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities. Although performance measures in these five areas have not been developed for higher education, the Cs should be a factor in curricular reform. Rather than utilizing the intermediate curriculum as a concluding review in a language requirement, faculty and students should concentrate on the refinement and synthesis of language skills, on the expansion of cultural knowledge, and on communication. At Washington University in 1999, instructors in intermediate French and Spanish courses successfully expanded materials to include one unit on Max Beckmann's years in Paris with a guided museum visit in French and another on the San Fermín in Spain with video footage, news broadcasts, and a comparison with Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. Central to this proposal is content designed to reach a wide student audience and to challenge students intellectually. A curriculum based on stimulating material and high expectations should inspire some students to continue language study.

Finally, the choice of teaching personnel and course leadership is central to the rigor proposal. Appointment of energetic, visionary instructors with a consistent personnel core should reinforce the key role of the intermediate curriculum. Instructors should play a role in all departmental curricular decisions, because the intermediate curriculum is the crucial link between general language education and specialized advanced programs. The department should encourage ongoing development of the curriculum through facilities and funds to support, for example, continuing education or training to use multimedia materials.

The second proposal — *the integration of language form with rich authentic content* — needs further explanation. If the intermediate curriculum is to distinguish itself from the elementary, it will be through its focus on accurate and independent understanding and performance for communication. To meet this goal, language skills and grammar must become refined through input, practice, review, expansion,

and recycling of material introduced at the elementary level. However, I suggest a review based on communicative objectives. The predominant class model would focus on content with necessary language functions or grammar embedded in a lesson and serving content as a handmaiden. Telling a fairy tale, for instance, requires a conglomerate of language skills and vocabulary such as an ability to understand and use several past tenses as well as connectors and time markers. To develop vocabulary, the instructor might begin by narrating a well-known fairy tale. An on-line tale might also enhance student vocabulary, through varied glosses. In the fairy tale example, language forms and grammar items support a larger goal, telling a story in the past. As distinct from more traditional approaches, grammar rules and paradigms are not here an objective in themselves, but rather the tools for constructing a tale.

Using a four-skill model, Bragger and Rice (1996) in *Quant a moi*, for example, label sections *Ecrivez!*, *Lisez!*, *Ecoutez!*, and *Parlez!* [Write! Read! Listen! Speak!]. These sections are interwoven with cultural materials and explicit grammar review and instruction. Chapter 1 of *Quant a moi* (1996) includes authentic input from audiotapes and videotapes to develop the listening skill; speaking and/or writing skill development based on the listening and viewing; and reading about *les Français et les Francophones chez eux*. Student-to-student communication occurs in an activity where students interview one another about housing needs and preferences. Interweaving authentic materials with communicative opportunities and skill development, the chapter also furnishes a review of adjective forms, agreement, and placement and relative pronouns. Like the fairy tale example, this multilayered approach illustrates the intermediate curriculum of the future.

The second proposal differs from the traditional approach to language instruction that emphasized what Swaffar, Arens, and Byrnes (1991) call the "*normative/input/language replication paradigm*, with foreign language learning defined as the ability to meet an absolute standard of grammatical correctness" (8). Rava calls the traditional, teacher-directed approach the REEEP technique: Rule, Example, Exception, Example, Practice through discrete, mechanical exercises. The intermediate curriculum was often the watchdog for a concentration on grammar, since its function was to round out a language requirement and/or to prepare students for the rigors of literature study where demands were high. Grammar moves from being the primary curricular force to being an important instrument for communication. As such grammar, is a necessary but not sufficient component of intermediate instruction.

Third, the intermediate curriculum should *utilize authentic material as its context*. Omaggio Hadley (1993) connects context to the target culture in the first of five hypotheses underlying her argument for contextualized

language instruction to achieve proficiency. She notes that students need practice “using language in a range of contexts likely to be encountered in the target culture” (77). The target culture should be an equal partner with the formal language structures of the intermediate curriculum. Since students’ receptive skills have developed to some degree at the intermediate level, everything from pop realia to literature and art may represent the target culture and provide an appropriate authentic context. In *¿Que Te Parece?*, Lee, Wolf, Young, and Chandler (1996) open each unit with an art gallery of reproductions of paintings by old masters such as El Greco as well as contemporary painters like Germán Pavón, an Ecuadoran artist. The unit closes with art vocabulary and activities involving comparisons and categorization of the works in the gallery.

The fourth guideline for the intermediate curriculum is *technological support and multimedia materials*. Technological support can enhance or replace traditional elements of the curriculum such as a syllabus or workbook. An on-line syllabus, for example, is suitable at many institutions and has several advantages. Instructors can amend or expand such a syllabus during the course of a semester, making it a living document tailored for the individual semester and student population. When a graduate TA, for instance, prepared a hypertext of a Creole folk tale, the staff of intermediate French at Washington University linked it to the fairy tale unit on the on-line syllabus. An on-line syllabus can also catalogue and link resources like grammar exercises, writing aids, maps, and dictionaries for use outside of class.

Likewise, the intermediate curriculum’s focus on independent language usage invites well-structured internet tasks geared to students’ linguistic level. Many students enter the intermediate level with experience using multimedia for language learning. Taking advantage of student skills and internet potential, instructors can enhance curriculum with tasks that challenge students to explore web sites; to analyze, synthesize, and summarize information; and to negotiate, present, and persuade based on their findings. The *Surf’s Up Website Workbooks* (1997) provide a wealth of generic suggestions and language-specific lesson ideas categorized by level.

E-mail and other modes of synchronous and asynchronous communication can also enrich the teaching and learning process. Listservs or e-mail can extend class discussion or give the instructor a chance for one-on-one communication with students. CD-ROMS, now a frequent component of textbook packages, represent a more controlled environment. A stand-alone CD-ROM product like the hypertext *CyberBuch* (1996), which contains two German short stories typically taught in the intermediate curriculum, targets reading skill with video, still picture, and verbal glosses as well as comprehension checks and

tests. *A la rencontre de Philippe*, a stand-alone laser-disc program, offers an engaging array of problem-solving activities to foster language and culture learning within the scenario of a young Parisian searching for an apartment. Finally, during the class hour, instructors with computer-equipped classrooms and the necessary know-how can set up discussions through chat rooms; project and correct writing assignments; introduce on-line resources (web sites); and initiate on-line activities such as information-gap tasks.

Integration of technology into the intermediate curriculum permits instructors to join their students in the cyberworld already familiar to many. The technology explosion furnishes language instructors and learners with myriad tools unimaginable in the past. At the same time, it brings the learner to the fore. Individual intermediate students at work using technology will have independence and responsibility. Instructors will have new roles as architects of multifaceted student learning tasks that both stimulate intellectual, creative, and cognitive development and educate students in the languages, cultures, and literatures that we cherish.

The fifth and final guideline advocates *treating the classroom as a community, with the learner as focal point*. The notion of community stems from a change in teaching practice based on pedagogical theory that stresses communicative, learner-centered teaching. Rava (1998), for example, highlights issues of language classroom “chemistry” that contribute to or detract from an effective learning community. Research on learners’ cognitive and affective processes drives many curricular changes that take into account student strategies, desires, and potential. Harlow and Muyskens (1994) note that creating a community helps to achieve a primary affective goal of intermediate language instructors and students: building self-confidence. Instructors in turn must move away from the Atlas complex — a metaphor describing a traditional teacher’s role first coined by Finkel and Monk (as quoted by Lee and VanPatten, 1995) and expanded by Lee and VanPatten (1995). An instructor with an Atlas complex envisages a classroom where his or her role “is to transmit knowledge and the students’ role is to receive that knowledge” (Lee and VanPatten 1995, 18). Instead, in a language learning community focused on communication, a passive student stands out as an anomaly.

### Sample Intermediate Lesson

The intermediate class period provides the ideal locus for students to hone language skills and to practice communication with instructor supervision and input. In a sample class, the instructor introduces authentic materials, orchestrates communicative tasks, and addresses the necessary language forms and functions. The instructor

should furnish as many opportunities as possible for students to assimilate, practice, and recycle materials in meaningful, communicative ways. Ballman (1998) says that in a learner-centered classroom “the instructor’s role is that of facilitator” (100). She spells out a four-step instructional sequence whereby the instructor guides the opening two steps, Setting the Stage and Providing Input. In the learner-centered activities suggested here, students develop communicative skills for which a classroom community is a must. Conversely, they should learn material such as grammar rules and write appropriate exercises at home. Instructors should, I would argue, also correct material at home rather than in class. Lee (1989) asserts: “If it can be done at home it *ought* to be done at home; if it can be done only in class with other people present, then it *has* to be done in class” (50). Lee’s idea contrasts with a traditional classroom concept, whereby the instructor transmits information — often spending a great deal of time on language paradigms, rules, and “right” answers.

The sample intermediate lesson plan integrates the five guidelines into an actual class session. The lesson adopts textbook materials from a *Quant a moi* unit on writing a physical and moral portrait. It concentrates on four characters from Sartre’s *Les Jeux sont faits*, which the students have just finished reading. It serves as a prewriting task for a character portrait.

*Step 1:* With guidance from the instructor, students begin to write on the board the most exotic colors they know. The recycling of familiar vocabulary serves as a warm-up when students enter the classroom and may provide activity as latecomers arrive. It also sets the stage for using color terms in the physical description featured in the lesson.

*Step 2:* The goal of this step is to furnish descriptive input with fanciful shapes and images, as well as a generic suffix for approximate colors in French that functions like “-ish” in English (“greenish,” *verdâtre*). The instructor might describe a scarf, tie, or colored picture with four or five subtle, nonprimary colors and modern, organic-looking shapes. The description taps into students’ imagination and prepares them for creative writing. Instructor input also includes comparisons with *comme* or *like* and with *ressembler a* or *to resemble*. For example, one shape resembles a whitish cloud floating in the sky.

*Step 3:* The instructor writes the names of four characters from the Sartre work on the board. Students list their physical traits on the board with colors previously generated, for example, greenish eyes or red-brown hair. This vocabulary functions as a support for the whole class. It becomes community property.

*Step 4:* The class focuses now on moral traits of the characters and together creates an image describing one character using *comme*, such as “Charlier is *sneaky like a fox*.”

*Step 5:* Students select one of the four characters as a topic for a portrait assignment and form groups for each character. The task is to brainstorm about the moral traits of the character and to invent several images using new expressions.

*Step 6:* At home, students write a draft of the physical and moral character portrait with the instructor’s understanding that compositions may borrow elements from those collectively invented in class. Sections of *Quant a moi* contain portrait organization and descriptive expressions.

*Follow-up:* In the next class session, selections from the film *Les Jeux sont faits* target the depiction of the four main characters. Film material can enhance students’ final version of the portrait assignment.

The instructor’s role in this lesson is very much that of the educator in the Latin sense of “leading.” The responsibility for learning, nonetheless, belongs to the students. In the sample lesson, they listen to meaningful input, rehearse vocabulary, speak as they write and create together, and begin to prepare material for an upcoming assignment. Some of these tasks could only be done in the classroom, because they involve collaborative brainstorming and invention. Students have abundant communicative opportunities when they practice the language and interpersonal skills needed to circumlocute, rephrase, and negotiate. The instructor has the chance for spontaneous cultural or linguistic input, diagnosis, and direction. Finally, the assignment — a draft of the portrait — is appropriately the individual student’s responsibility and undertaken at home.

Like the instructor’s role as facilitator, the order of the lesson also illustrates a nontraditional paradigm. The reversal of traditional lesson sequencing is a cornerstone of this intermediate curriculum. Instead of presenting rules or paradigms, proceeding to mechanical, noncontextualized practice, and perhaps ending with an illustrative passage, the instructor reverses the order by starting with an illustrative and meaningful passage. Students are active from the outset by generating some of the vocabulary necessary for their work. They take from the class session those language forms they need to communicate their character description. In short, both major phases of the lesson — content and form — contribute to the students’ learning experience.

Developing similar lesson plans for the intermediate curriculum demands an instructor’s conviction, organization, flexibility, and imagination. During a class session, the instructor may need to modify a task and must accept multiple and unexpected results. Furthermore, the instructor must be able to provide direct language instruction when called upon. Within such a curriculum, student results will reflect individual tastes, learning styles, language levels, interests, and effort. The instructor admit-

tedly gives up the traditional expectation of one correct answer or one interpretation. Students' moral portraits of Sartrean characters, for example, may well diverge from the instructor's training and ideas. Nonetheless, the instructor should abandon the Atlas complex and concentrate on his or her supporting role in providing the student-builders with the plans and the tools they need.

The sample lesson requires a working classroom community and demonstrates the effective implementation and interplay of the five guidelines. The *classroom community* expects *rigor* from students and instructors. The lesson *integrates language forms into its activities* with a review and expansion of color descriptors and an introduction of stylistic devices like comparisons for writing a portrait. *Authentic cultural materials* come from the reading and discussion of Sartre's work. *Contemporary technology and multimedia* follow as students view scenes from the film of *Les Jeux sont faits*, chosen to focus on character presentation.

## Conclusion

Although many instructors would agree with and profess to following several of the guidelines described here, this article is a call for instructors to combine all five principles. When implemented in totality, the guidelines answer the dilemma of how to envisage an intermediate curriculum. Their adoption would help complete a language requirement sequence with aplomb and would motivate and prepare students for further language study. Implementation of the guidelines *in toto* is a way for instructors to pioneer in making curricular changes. The classroom example shows how the guidelines can contribute to bringing the intermediate curriculum to the forefront of the language education. For the short time that students are in class, instructors are the gatekeepers to an international future. Through effective and innovative language teaching, faculty will join with other educators in embracing a multicultural outlook for the new millennium.

## Note

1. A version of this article was presented at the American Association Teachers of French Conference in Lyons, France in July 1996.

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