

Turning Professional: Content-Based Communication and the Evolution of a Cross-Cultural Language Curriculum

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— For Perry Gilmore and David Smith, Ethnographers

Abstract: *The fact that nine out of ten students drop out of language classes between the elementary and advanced levels demonstrates the need for addressing the traditional division of language and content courses prevailing in most modern language departments. Furthermore, the increasing demand for professional language classes makes it necessary to adjust the overall undergraduate program so that these courses fit meaningfully into the mainly humanities-oriented curriculum. If students are to bridge the gap between form and meaning, courses need to move from communicative training at the elementary level through an intermediate stage that combines communicative and content-based instruction. Finally, training students successfully for future careers in a global economy means that courses cannot focus only on content and form, but also must include a thorough development of cultural awareness. Applying ethnographic intercultural training methods to the language classroom ensures that the students attain not only linguistic but also cultural proficiency. The course structure presented in this paper demonstrates that professional school students can be trained alongside humanities majors by making minor but far-reaching adjustments to the elementary and intermediate language program, and without placing undue constraints on departmental resources.*

Introduction

Despite the fact that most Business, Engineering, and Law Schools express the need for training their graduates for the global marketplace, Lambert (1989) places many language departments' attrition rates from elementary and advanced language courses at around 90%. The reasons students cite for not continuing include not having enough time to complete the graduation requirements for a language major, considering language study for its own sake impractical, and finding that the more traditional literature courses do not fit their needs as future accountants, engineers, or social or natural scientists. In addition, they perceive advanced language courses as being too difficult.¹

Evidently, motivation, viable alternatives to a language major, and new course content play

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essential roles in students' decisions to continue studying foreign languages. For one, students who did not take enough language classes in high school and who started too late at the college level, but want to continue with meaningful language study, might continue if they could pursue a limited credit language certificate or minor with an emphasis on linguistic proficiency.² Second, students opting not to pursue further courses after the intermediate level see the gap between "language" and "content" courses as too large, and are therefore indirectly signaling that the first and second year language sequence is not adequately preparing them to continue successfully. Finally, attracting new kinds of students from the Professional Schools means developing suitable course content. Yet, how can small departments with limited resources battle a stifling attrition rate and simultaneously accommodate language students' changing needs through curricular reform, without severely straining their budgets or placing undue constraints on their faculty (usually comprised of literature scholars)?

Cross-Cultural Dimensions of Language Learning

Offering language courses with a professional focus — such as Elementary German with thematic business, engineering, or law clusters — is nothing new. Their primary audiences are MBA or other advanced degree students, who often lack foreign language skills and have only limited time for language study. Not surprisingly, such instructional endeavors are largely unsuccessful, and these graduate students never master more than the basics of polite conversation. At best, upon completion of such an isolated course, successful students can signal some measure of cultural and linguistic interest to their English-speaking foreign hosts. Besides, having attained only rudimentary foreign language skills before graduating with an MBA in International Business serves to reinforce the common American misconceptions that learning lists of words and cultural facts will suffice for proper communication. Technically still monolingual, they might nevertheless infer that cultural proficiency is a translatable skill and that substituting words and cultural phenomena from their own language with those from the target language and culture ensures true communication and international success. The resulting attitude disregards the entire value system underlying a target language and culture, which mere facts, of course, cannot transmit, and only serves to deepen already existing stereotypes. As Kramsch has stated for the communicative language classroom: "culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when

they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them" (1993,1).

Having reached a novice–mid proficiency level at best obfuscates the fact that learning another language and gaining insights into the culture embedded therein not only provides linguistic training but also an opportunity for acquiring cultural awareness of both the target culture and the individual's own culture. Those who have attained basic knowledge of a second language alongside a list of cultural facts remain, for all intents and purposes, monolingual, having merely glimpsed the target culture and the language informing it. If embedding language into its cultural context is essential for appropriate communication, teaching business or engineering content-clusters in elementary language courses will do nothing more than familiarize students with specialized vocabulary items, barring sufficient language form and cultural context. A simple example illustrates this point: A common but wrong assumption is that the so-called culture of business and technology is universally comprehensible because the international *lingua franca* is English. However, as Kramsch suggests, since business culture is always rooted in the cultural imagination of the given country, business and technology experts are naturally dependent on culture-bound perceptions. Thus, in England, France, and Germany — all member nations of the European Union — the word "engineer" pertains to a common profession but nevertheless covers very diverse competency levels, professional functions, and social statuses that cannot be understood by merely translating the term into its target language equivalent (1993, 227).

In fact, as Byram and Esarte-Sarries (1991) state, direct experience of another culture involves both cognitive and affective dimensions of the personality. The individual needs to accept divergent ways of thinking and behaving, while simultaneously developing behavioral patterns that members of the target culture can at least tolerate. Language students must also obtain an awareness of culture shock in alien, often unpleasant, and even potentially threatening situations (6). Yet, only recently have language professionals begun contributing to the spate of research on the practical applications of culture clash and intercultural communication conducted by anthropologists, sociolinguists, exile historians, cross-cultural psychologists, and international management specialists. As language study increasingly becomes an issue for professional schools in preparing their graduates for a global economy, a candidate's ability to communicate across the cultural divide becomes an asset, providing a competitive edge on the job market. Hence, a case study like Hedderich's (1999), which describes predominantly German and American engineering students in international internships, lends some

urgency to the plea for making intensive cross-cultural training an integral part of language instruction.

According to Hall and Hall's (1989) concept of high- and low-context cultures, so-called high-context peoples such as French and Japanese depend more on nonverbal signals in their business transactions, whereas their low-context counterparts in the United States and Germany need clear, often written forms of communication. Arguably, Germans and Americans rank fairly closely to each other when contrasted with Mediterranean, Latin American, or Asian cultures. Though Germans and Americans are culturally relatively similar, Hedderich's study highlights apparently small differences as sources of significant conflicts when it comes to attitudes about work, independence, innovation, work pace, teamwork, and management. As for divergent communicative styles, Rings' (1994) comparison of German and American routine uses of greeting formulae and small talk, and the importance each culture places on them, also reveals significant differences. She therefore underlines the importance of teaching the pragmatics of discourse at all proficiency levels.

Hedderich's American student sample consisted of undergraduates pursuing dual degrees in German and Engineering, who had reached a level of proficiency allowing them to function in a German professional environment. Since such a level of proficiency is unattainable for graduate students with minuscule previous language training, substantial curricular reform efforts are more productively directed towards either graduate students with advanced language skills or undergraduates with enough time to pursue either a double major or acquire a language certificate. Seeking to attain cultural proficiency, both instructors and students need to become ethnographers, as Byram and Esarte-Samies (1991) claim, who learn "language and culture as a whole in order to describe and understand the people in question. [This positions them] to reflect on [their] own culture and perceive and understand it from the viewpoint of the outsider." The students learn the language "for cultural understanding," which naturally also includes language for literary reading (10f). In short, students attain a heightened awareness of cultural diversity and change their self-conceptions, attitudes, and even behaviors. Conversely, in order to enable teachers who are non-native speakers to integrate the target culture adequately into their language instruction, Allen (2000) proposes using ethnographic interview techniques as a strategy in foreign language teacher training.

Developing Professional Content Courses for Communication

Recent curricular reform efforts, such as those described by Byrnes (2000) and Krueger and Ryan (1993), include

innovative approaches that often place considerable demands on departmental resources. Several models emphasize reaching out to other disciplines and advocate the teaching of content courses in the target language by a bilingual or a native content specialist, thus seeming to suggest that language professionals may be obsolete for advanced professional purpose courses. Byrnes, on the other hand, indicates that meaningful curricular reform can only come about if the prevailing departmental culture is radically transformed. She demands the elimination of the traditional division of lower-level language and upper-level content courses, but concedes that such distinctions are deeply entrenched and exist in most institutions. They are not only a matter of power relationships, but also serve the vested interests of the tenured faculty who often decline to see an intellectual connection between form-focused language and meaning-focused content courses. Whereas tenured faculty mainly teach content courses, and contract lecturers, adjuncts, or graduate students teach courses centered around form, meaning-focused courses are often not designed to attend to the learner's acquisition needs in terms of form. Curricular reform can therefore only succeed when it links the acquisition of meaning and form throughout the entire undergraduate program (148f). Thus, such complete program redesign can only be initiated by tenured faculty and must be supported by the whole department.

The reform models mentioned above are predicated upon a new concept of institutional culture, in which the artificial but century-old division between "language" and "content" has ceased to exist. Since this is not the case at most institutions, the author's suggestions for curriculum enhancement are much less ambitious in scope and fit the more traditional department, where content and form, depending on the individual instructor, still reside on opposite sides of the curricular spectrum. In short, she proposes the development of two professional language and culture courses, as well as several minor adjustments to the existing curriculum.

In the case of German, one course focuses on acquiring factual knowledge about the structure of the European Union and the economic geography of German-speaking countries. Students examine the importance of environmental legislation, the effects of a unified European currency, and the vestiges of preunification attitudes and how they influence Germany's evolution into a multicultural nation of immigrants. The course also contains more mundane communicative tasks pertaining to general phone etiquette, the composition of E-mail inquiries about the status of an order or a job announcement, and a résumé. In fact, writing the résumé and a job inquiry form the basis of one of the oral exams: a simulated job interview over the telephone. Content-wise, the second course focuses on in-

depth discussions of current issues facing local businesses and global corporations within the European Union, a comparison of how German and American companies are portrayed on the Internet and by the print media, and recent trends in E-commerce. Students are also expected to analyze business transactions in writing and on video. Furthermore, case studies, simulation games, and role-playing train students to communicate appropriately and identify and react to common issues in intercultural communication. In fact, one of the videos, *Eine Reklamation* (1990), which details a business transaction between the French owner of a vineyard and a German wine merchant, illustrates both business partners' failure to understand the differences between high- and low-context cultures, their communication strategies, and their business practices.

Alongside role-playing, case studies, and the Internet, video plays a crucial role in helping students become more culturally aware. The suitability of this medium to intercultural training lies in its versatility. Of course, students concentrate on the content of the spoken language, just as they would when reading a text or listening to a cassette tape or CD. However, they can also be asked to note body language and facial expressions; to avoid distraction, the sound can be turned off. Conversely, by playing the audio portion only (without the video image), students can concentrate on intonation patterns before viewing the entire sequence with both audio and video. Video is equally valuable for investigating cultural differences, such as varying attitudes and divergent concepts of personal space. Obviously, since both courses focus on current events, most available textbooks are outdated too quickly, even though they may contain useful form-focused exercises. The students are required to work mainly with current media and the Internet. Likewise, CALL or WELL (Computer-Assisted or Web-Enhanced Language Learning) technology can help students attain computer and video literacy in the target language, further preparing them for professional life.

Technology-enhanced course content based on current media output helps students grasp culture as a multifaceted, highly complex construct that influences people's ideals and aspirations, values, beliefs, and especially language. Challenging students to learn how to think like members of the target culture, or at least understand how its members think, should be one of the main goals of any language class, and even more so of one that professes to prepare them for the target culture's professional environment. It is therefore essential that in-class activities and homework assignments not only heighten students' self-awareness, but also provide them with opportunities to practice and demonstrate their understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity — in their own culture and in the target culture. As Jurasek (1995) states, training lan-

guage students through ethnographical methods turns them into cultural learners who first analyze their own cultural frames of reference, then gradually change their cognitive and affective outlook as they begin to see things through the eyes of the target culture (228).

Here again, the fields of anthropology and cross-cultural training (Brislin 1993, Juffer 1993) provide valuable source material for the second language classroom. In addition, simulation games designed by ethnographers for use by global corporations, the Peace Corps, the military, and the Foreign Service place people in situations in which they experience culture shock. Thiagarajan (1990) says, about such a game, that the participants "learn that they must understand and reconcile these differences if they want to function effectively in a cross-cultural group" (4). Powers (1999), on the other hand, maintains that even the most tolerant players "discover that their judgements are biased and influenced by stereotypes [which enables them] to understand that differences and diversity are not synonymous with problems and difficulties; instead, they can be our strength" (5). Other activities such as the ones proposed by Behal-Thomsen et al. (1993), are geared specifically towards German-American interaction. These activities offer a wide range of material, investigating cultural differences related to issues of personal space, privacy, friendship, and collegiality.

It is crucial that the objectives of such role-playing or simulation games are clarified beforehand and that in-depth debriefings conclude each activity. Students should also understand that they do not need to reach a right or wrong solution, but should instead explore communicative boundaries. An excellent vehicle for communication training, according to Ulrich (2000) and Loughrin-Sacco and Fronmueller (1998), are business case studies, which require defining, explaining, and generalizing information in speech acts containing questions, comparisons, analyses, and hypotheses. Thus, when case studies are coupled with cultural awareness exercises, professional language classes move away from mere communicative to cross-cultural practices, and by doing so empower their students to gain deeper cultural and factual insights. Learning about themselves and their own reactions in unsettling situations helps students move toward the acquisition of what Kramsch terms the fifth language skill: cultural proficiency.

Adjusting the Language Curriculum

Another way that the Professional course sequence can prepare students to work independently is by using target-language Internet resources, some of which Gonglewski (1999) links to attainment of the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning. Gauthier (1998) also outlines several advantages of making the Internet one of the cornerstones for professional language courses. Web assign-

ments, if planned carefully and contextualized meaningfully within the overall course structure, provide opportunities for authentic language use and motivate students to pursue concrete and personal projects. E-mail exchanges with members of the target culture broaden cross-cultural awareness. In the author's opinion, however, the most valuable skill students obtain through a course thus structured is learning how to take the initiative. In fact, it was precisely one student's E-mail initiative — part of a course assignment — that secured him an internship in Germany.

Professional students are often required to do internships or practical rotations off campus that impede their pursuing degrees or certificates in the Humanities. For example, the student who obtained an internship through an e-mail initiative, mentioned above, was unable to enroll in the last language class he needed to fulfill certificate requirements. For such students who cannot complete all of their course requirements on campus, the author is piloting an academic internship component in the form of an independent study, which parallels the professional internship. While working abroad or off campus, the student is simultaneously enrolled for academic credit at the American institution and remains in constant E-mail contact with his or her language instructor. By the end of both the internship and the academic term, the student will have submitted a variety of descriptive, interpretive, and evaluative written assignments in the target language, and have taken an oral exit exam with his or her academic sponsor — possibly conducted over the telephone (depending on logistics).

Advanced language courses for professional purposes tend to enroll students from a variety of backgrounds, who often have different agendas than students pursuing degrees in the Humanities. Therefore, to make these courses dovetail with the entire undergraduate program, the reorganization of both elementary and intermediate language instruction is very important. Most institutions can neither rely on the level of intercampus cooperation between the professional schools and the language departments outlined by Grandin (1989) and Grandin and Hedderich (1994) at the University of Rhode Island, nor the depth of departmental cooperation Byrnes describes at Georgetown University. Still, as long as the students have attained intermediate linguistic and cultural proficiency, a few minor adjustments can ensure meaningful inclusion of language courses for professional purposes in a predominantly humanities-oriented curriculum, without necessitating major retraining efforts for the teaching staff. Teachers need to know how to analyze target language Internet sources and video sequences, to be familiar with basic writing conventions and the target culture's phone etiquette, and to have acquired the ability to decode authentic materials of varying difficulty.

As Brynes indicates, language departments tend to rely on textbooks and various methodologies as a substitute for genuine curricular discussion and argues that the textbook industry thus makes them subject to methodological swings of the pendulum (150). While she raises valid points, in most departments, all members do not share an underlying curricular vision. Generally, however, if the department subscribes to communication-oriented instruction, its members have agreed to further the four language skills of Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking. Despite having relatively commonplace, textbook-based language programs, they also aim to enhance students' cultural awareness; elementary textbooks that cater to communication-based methodologies, which tend to include a fair number of (albeit only loosely) contextualized dialogues, can be used to attain this goal.

Rings (2000), for example, applies sociolinguistic tools to textbook dialogues to construct meaning for the learner. She proposes following Dell Hymes' model, which claims that sentence-level meaning, words, and grammar alone are insufficient for full understanding of a communicative exchange, because they do not account for the social creation of meaning in the nature of speech. Merely understanding the words of a conversation without, for example, being familiar with intonation patterns specific to the target culture does not clarify how its members may interpret them. From Hymes' theory, Rings derives several sets of questions designed to help the language learner make sense of a given dialogue and concludes that beginning textbooks do not provide enough information for the student to fully understand them. In fact, according to Rings, the very nature of these dialogues is such that they cannot provide enough clues to ensure complete, in-depth comprehension. She therefore proposes realizing the students' creative potential by asking them to produce their own answers to questions based on the Hymesian model, finding that this furthers the students' involvement in their own learning.

According to Gardner's (1999) theory on multiple intelligences, every learner uses different sets of skills and has preferred strategies for acquiring the material taught. Therefore, planning for a variety of learner types ensures success. Granted, expecting a certain amount of originality from language students tends to create uneasiness among those who feel less confident in their linguistic abilities. Yet, employing multiple methods to teach the same material also serves to alleviate anxiety. Allowing students to proceed at their own pace, at the same time sharing their work with each other, enables those students who take more risks to demonstrate the possibilities for interpretation and creative language use to their more reticent classmates. Rings (2000) maintains that students of a second language need as much information as do native speakers

to interpret language. Beginning students can be more involved with learning by creating deeper meanings and interpretations and learn better by what she terms “authenticizing” textbook dialogues; and since language is not produced in a context-free environment, students need to be trained to arrive at an understanding of deeper levels of textual meaning. Training them to infer meaning at the elementary level prepares them for in-depth processing of more difficult authentic texts later — be they literary or professional in nature.

In traditionally structured departments, accountability for student enrollments and personnel constraints dictate that both professional and humanities students are educated together until they reach an adequate proficiency level. Even if Hymes’ model for a deeper creation of meaning is consistently employed, the elementary language sequence alone cannot sufficiently prepare students to deal with the highly complex and complicated authentic material that they eventually need to understand in the target language. In addition, assigning virtual field trips with interactive video and audio clips and teaching students to evaluate a variety of authentic materials both in print and on the web should be priorities from the beginning. Developing aural and oral communication skills and familiarizing students with the target culture’s phone etiquette and letter writing conventions are equally essential. To this end, a telephone exam might be substituted for a face-to-face oral exam once every term — without major course restructuring. Depending on the course, tasks may range from planning a party at a restaurant, booking a trip, or carrying out a marketing survey or opinion poll over the telephone.

The second year of language instruction adds a content-based cultural history component to the attainment of all five skills. In the case of German, students begin to analyze authentic biographic, historical, visual, and literary texts from the twentieth century critically.³ Returning to the idea of the learner as ethnographer, the author proposes a cultural studies approach both to discourse analysis and to making sense of textual and visual content. As Byram and Esarte-Samies (1991) argue, “literary texts often distill contemporary meaning and values from the complexity of societal activity in clearer ways than other texts. On the other hand, the latter may clarify the literary text precisely where distillation has made the meanings obscure to a foreign [or] non-contemporary reader” (12). In addition, Swaffar et al. (1991) maintain that the introduction of authentic material from the beginning serves to move students’ attention away from mere surface reading by providing them with the tools they need to interact meaningfully with any text type. In fact, strategies such as skimming and scanning not only train successful target language readers but also enhance native language reading skills. Translation and word-for-word reading, on the other hand,

focus the students’ attention on surface details rather than communicative substance — habits that discourage readers’ self-reliance.

An approach at the intermediate level that includes both form and content has the benefit of deepening linguistic skills while simultaneously familiarizing both groups of students with Germany’s more recent history. Hence it creates a deeper understanding of the development of the European Union. Factual, historical, literary, political, and social knowledge of the target culture, alongside the students’ ever-evolving linguistic and cultural proficiency will adequately prepare them to branch out into more specialized course content and to communicate and read for in-depth understanding — be it in a professional field or in the Humanities.

Conclusion

Although this article has described the evolution of a German curriculum, such changes could easily be effected in any language program. Rethinking the curriculum within the confines of a traditional language department entails providing the students with a basis for communication combined with the tools to make sense of authentic materials at the elementary level. In the intermediate sequence, a combination of communicative and content-based instruction prepares them to succeed in more content-focused courses at the advanced level and thus aids student retention. Instructors of courses for professional purposes must be familiar with the basics of economic geography, business, management, and finance. They must know or acquire appropriate specialized vocabulary, for example, the terminology used in business letter and résumé writing and business transactions in the target culture. Yet by no means do they need to become economists, political analysts, engineers, or finance specialists. On the contrary, the author finds it very rewarding to draw on her students’ factual expertise when teaching these courses. Conversely, her students have voiced their appreciation of both the technology-enhanced instructional modules and the cultural awareness training.

Short of a deep-seated change in institutional culture, adding a few pragmatic touches to the entire language program guarantees that humanities majors and professional school students acquire both the factual knowledge and linguistic and cultural proficiency needed to succeed in the more specialized courses in their respective fields. In the process, they will become better readers in their native language, learn to communicate orally in a more structured fashion, and come to appreciate cultural diversity. Becoming linguistically functional and culturally aware is especially important in a global economy. Granted, students may not attain near-native fluency if they do not study or complete an internship abroad. They also may not

be able to negotiate substantial deals for their companies without interpreters at their sides — a solo task only for the truly bilingual and bicultural individual. They will be, however, prepared to embark on a life-long learning process. Moreover, successful students — having gained the ability to understand authentic documents, the thrust of business negotiations, and, above all, the volatile nature of intercultural communication — will have acquired the tools necessary to communicate in culturally appropriate ways in a variety of situations.

Notes

1. In March of 1997, an E-mail-questionnaire was sent to 132 students at the elementary and intermediate levels. It asked students to give the reasons why they were not continuing their language study. Eighty-one students responded. This questionnaire did not ask students about how misconceptions about learning languages and language anxiety played a role in the decision to abandon language study altogether.
2. In 1997, my colleague, Sabine von Dirke, developed and proposed a Language Proficiency Certificate for which students must complete 12 credits of advanced German language courses. It comprises two tracks: "German for the Humanities," which is housed within the more traditional courses the Department also offers its majors, and "German for Professional Purposes," for which two new courses were developed with content and activities geared specifically towards functioning in a German-speaking professional environment. All majors and certificate students take the two other advanced language courses the Department offers regularly, which do not have a literary focus: "Advanced Media" and "Advanced Structures of German." The departmental German minor, on the other hand, is not proficiency-oriented but is solely content-based. After having completed the Elementary German sequence, German minors can take courses taught mainly in English, even in other departments, such as History, Film, and Political Science, as long as they have German content-matter.
3. In 1996, my colleagues, Beverly Harris-Schenz and Sabine von Dirke, reorganized the intermediate language curriculum by employing a cultural studies approach. Students first read a prize-winning children's book thematizing xenophobia in Germany (Verena Ballhaus, Paul Maar, *Neben mir ist noch Platz*). Then they began reading short biographical, historical, and literary texts by authors, politicians, and artists collected in Andreas Lixl Purcell's anthology *Stimmen eines Jahrhunderts*. Simultaneously, the entire grammatical structure of German was reviewed. I have built on this invaluable groundwork by my colleagues and further adapted the curriculum by adding Internet activities, contextualized telephone exams, and a variety of video clips, which either enhance the authentic texts or challenge the students to react to diverse content matter.

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