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Discipline- and Content-Based
Approaches to
Language Study —————

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— Chapter 1

Resituating Foreign Languages in the Curriculum

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In the over two hundred years since the establishment of the country's first modern language department at the College of William and Mary, foreign language curricula at American colleges and universities have become tightly linked with preparing students to read and interpret literary masterworks. Today, joining language study and literature study within the same academic department is largely taken for granted. "Language" departments typically structure their requirements for the major, and hence most courses after the fourth or fifth semester, around literary history and theory. To be sure, definitions of the canon have changed dramatically in response to evolving critical methods and heightened sensitivity to issues of gender, race, class, and ethnicity. Still, students who wish to pursue language study beyond the intermediate level must generally choose from courses organized on the basis of literary genres, periods, or critical approaches, regardless of their major or field of interest. This arrangement assumes that, beyond the intermediate level, literary texts provide the most appropriate subject matter for developing in all students the communicative competence now widely accepted as the primary goal of language instruction. This is a problematic assumption for several reasons. As we become more and more conscious of the importance of foreign language competence in disciplines throughout the university, we need to ask whether students would profit more from combining foreign language study with the subject matter of those fields. At the same time, we need to examine more closely the didactic implications for learning *any* subject matter (including literature) in the medium of a second language and the second language through other disciplines. The purpose of this book is to summarize what knowledge we have of these issues and to stimulate further discussion of them in the future.

Calls for curricular alternatives to the traditional orientation towards literature have built to crescendo in recent years. Several contributors to this volume suggest that there is much to be gained by opening the foreign language curriculum to a

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broader array of disciplines. If students can study a foreign language through literary texts and literature in a foreign language, can they not also study other subjects through a foreign language and foreign language through other subjects? What are the benefits and deficits of such "content-based" instruction? How can this idea be implemented in university courses and study materials? Integrating foreign language study and academic disciplines, which for reasons discussed further on we refer to as "discipline-based" approaches to language study, poses questions that go to the heart of our professional enterprise and challenges long established notions about the academic discipline in which we are engaged. The essays in this book describe several ongoing experiments in American higher education which suggest some tentative answers.

Good reasons undoubtedly exist for the traditional marriage of language and literary studies in modern language departments. The accent on individuality and creativity in literary expression reveals the potentiality, flexibility, and aesthetic beauty of language use much more effectively than, say, the typical business report. The purview of literature embraces virtually all of human experience and imagination, a critical antidote to the alienating effects of academic and professional specialization. Furthermore, a country's best authors are keenly sensitive observers of the customs, prejudices, idiosyncrasies, and concerns of its people. Their works (re)create the unique culture of their time and place, and as such are invaluable documents for developing cross-cultural awareness and an appreciation for humanistic values. The question is not whether literature has a key place in a liberal education, nor whether learning a foreign language is necessary for true understanding of the literature in that language, nor even whether the study of literature is a legitimate reason for learning a foreign language. As language educators we must ask ourselves rather, whether preparing students to read, discuss, and interpret literary texts should continue to be the overriding principle behind the organization of the curriculum and the governance of modern language departments at colleges and universities.

Since at least the early seventies, foreign language scholars have been advocating virtually *unisono* that classroom instruction stress those skills learners actually need in order to communicate effectively with adult native speakers in real-life situations. The emphasis upon "communicative competence" has served to differentiate use-oriented, student-centered, context-embedded instruction from what was perceived as an inordinate concern with formal structures and grammatical rules, presented with minimal attention to communicative function and drilled without reference to discernibly meaningful contexts. Foreign language faculty have quite rightly rejected pedagogical approaches and methodologies which taught students how to conjugate correctly the past subjunctive of irregular stem-changing verbs but left them at a loss to buy a pair of socks. Stung by critical studies and governmental reports that documented the deplorable state of language proficiency among high school and college students (cf. Grosse 1991: 195), and even among undergraduate language majors (Carroll 1967), educators restructured their courses, de-emphasizing rote memorization of abstract grammar principles and concentrating instead on the ability to convey and comprehend meaningful utterances. Lowering demands for grammatical precision in exchange

for greater fluency probably means that by the time they can communicate with native speakers in the target language.

Behind the push for more practical applications of language learning is the recognition of the gap between the functional language skills of the seventies and the needs of the twenty-first century. The emphasis on learning language for intellectual and cultural understanding is mounting to a point where economic predictors and business leaders argue that language skills are part of the competitive edge. Concerns and debates about the alternatives to improve the ability to speak a second language for occupational and personal advancement.

Worldwide efforts to continue to foster language awareness in the political arena are seen as important "strategic" applications that include programs for "second languages," as well as research in the use of materials, the development of authentic communication, and the determination of how to promote second language world communication. The staggering amount of money drawn into the field which culture (Kramsch) contextualized in the past face and effectively.

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for greater fluency, teachers learned to accept the notion that their students would probably never be taken for native speakers of the target language; at the same time they came to expect them to be able to negotiate meaning with native speakers in the target language.

Behind this shift in perspective lay a renewed emphasis upon the real-world applications of foreign languages, their use value as a means of genuine communication between people of different linguistic and cultural communities, and their functional importance in the corporate, government, and academic worlds. In the seventies and eighties, educators increasingly invoked pragmatic purposes for learning languages, rather than such broad justifications as their importance as an intellectual exercise, as exposure to a foreign culture, as paths to international understanding, or as a pillar of a humanistic education. The Vietnam War and mounting trade deficits brought home the point that America's political and economic predominance after World War II was waning. Government and business leaders argued that the nation's eroding competitiveness could be attributed in part at least to the poor language skills of its citizens. Spurred on by these concerns and by slumping enrollments in language classes, educators launched initiatives to improve language instruction in schools and universities. Increasingly, the ability to speak one or more foreign languages was touted as an important asset for occupational and professional success.

World events—and the presentation of these events in the mass media—continue to foster the conviction that our society must develop greater international awareness in order to compete effectively in the global marketplace and the world political arena. In this environment, foreign languages are viewed more and more as important, even essential skills for professionals in many fields. "Communicative" approaches recognize and promote language in use. Additional efforts include programs to expand the study of so-called "less commonly taught languages," as well as the reinstitution and tightening of foreign language requirements at many colleges and universities. A substantial amount of scholarship and research has been devoted to developing classroom methodologies, teaching materials, and technological innovations that expose learners to a rich environment of authentic language and create more opportunities for practicing genuine communication in the second language. Research studies have been designed to determine which instructional techniques, environments, and materials effectively promote second language acquisition as measured by proficiency skills in real-world communication tasks (see Freed 1991). From careful analysis of the staggeringly complex phenomenon of language itself, language educators have drawn important conclusions for the significance of context and the heavy impact which cultural, social, and interpersonal settings exert upon adult language usage (Kramsch and McConnell-Ginet 1992). A deeper understanding of the role of contextual factors has prompted them to consider more carefully than they have in the past what contexts, circumstances, and settings their students are likely to face and what linguistic skills they are likely to need in order to function effectively and appropriately in those contexts.

From the postulate that instruction should promote communicative competence for multiple real-world situations, involving a variety of interlocutors and

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contexts, the step is a short one to the corollary of "discipline-based" (or "content-based") language teaching and learning. If in an interdependent world our graduates are more and more likely to require second language abilities in their professional careers, should they not learn and practice communicating through their second language as much as possible on the topics and in the vocabulary, discourse strategies, and settings appropriate to their chosen specializations? Pairing languages with other disciplines holds the promise of raising student motivation to begin language study and to continue longer. For some learners the intellectual challenge is reason enough to commit the time and effort necessary to achieve proficiency, while others have strong personal reasons, such as a desire to communicate with friends or relatives in the language. But these will always be a small minority. The prospect of someday traveling abroad to where the language is spoken also offers meagre incentive for investing several semesters' work, even if the prospect is relatively close at hand. However, individuals who understand that knowledge of another language will be useful in their occupations and valuable in their professional careers are likely to show much stronger commitment to stay on task. The effort devoted to attaining genuine facility in the language will seem more worthwhile if viewed as an integral part of their professional education.

In the past, modern language scholars have sometimes felt like prophets in a linguistic wasteland, imploring their university colleagues and society at large to recognize the intellectual substance of language study and its key importance in liberal education and critical thinking. For a complex set of historical, political, economic, social, and ideological reasons alluded to earlier, the message has begun to win converts in the university, in government, and in business and industry. (This is not to say, of course, that the battle is over; see, for example, the rather sobering assessment of corporate executives' attitudes in Fixman 1990.) The "global village" has become a cliché for an increasingly interdependent world, where an ethnocentric focus in education is hopelessly obsolete. Professors in the humanities, the social sciences, the natural sciences, and professional schools now appreciate the parochialism of university scholars who lack any foreign language proficiency. Faculty throughout the university now promote the study of foreign languages with unprecedented conviction. In several of the experimental programs discussed in this volume the impetus for expanding languages across the curriculum has come from scholars and teachers outside modern language departments. Not only are important texts and other materials often not translated, but even the best translations, where they do exist, can convey only incompletely the full range of connotations of the original. Critical insights into the history, political institutions, social structures, artistic traditions, economic behavior—in short, the culture—of a society remain closed to those without a sound knowledge of its language. What credence would we give, for example, to a Bulgarian TV journalist's report from the New Hampshire primary, if she didn't speak English well? Influential faculty, administrators, and policy planners understand that we can no longer apply a different standard to our own citizens. Internationalization of American higher education requires that all students acquire genuine foreign language competency, not just students of literature or linguistics.

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"Foreign languages across the curriculum" programs and other "discipline-based" foreign language initiatives offer a new solution to perhaps the two biggest handicaps North American language teachers face, namely, convincing students of the usefulness of foreign languages in a society where English seems virtually ubiquitous, and providing meaningful contexts for using their language skills. By providing new opportunities to apply language knowledge to learning subject matter of direct relevance to their degree, these initiatives demonstrate to students the importance of a second language within the university as a whole and beyond. If, on the other hand, languages are never used in any courses other than literature, this sends a clear signal that they really have no other important use. In his recent assessment of undergraduate language instruction in American higher education, Richard Lambert argues that integrating languages throughout the curriculum represents one of the most promising ways to develop a use-oriented foreign language system. "If students learn in their undergraduate college that all that is worth learning is available in English, they are likely to continue with this misconception throughout their lives." (1990: 24) The availability of foreign language components in courses from other disciplines promises not only to motivate students to begin language study initially, but also to continue to practice it after completing their formal language study per se and thereby to retain their skills. By creating as many assignment options as possible involving non-English languages, students should be stimulated eventually to apply their language abilities on their own initiative. Language study in American higher education must aim not only to produce graduates proficient in a foreign language at a single point in time, but graduates who genuinely use the language in their professional and personal lives. Students must learn to seek out their own opportunities for language use while still in school; only then are they likely to do so after graduation and thus to retain or even expand their skills beyond their formal education.

Of course, there is nothing radically new about the notion that a second language can be learned through the study of another discipline and the content of that discipline in turn through the medium of a second language. Christian monks of the European Middle Ages studied Latin and ancient Greek religious texts in order to learn these languages as well as comprehend and analyze the messages of these texts. The formal pairing of modern languages and literatures in academic departments in America followed the Prussian university reforms instituted by Wilhelm von Humboldt in the early nineteenth century (Peck 1987). Classical philology and the hermeneutics of ancient texts provided the precedent and the methodology for the study of "living" languages. Although this became the norm, teaching additional academic subjects in foreign languages continued in other settings. The influential French language pedagogue Gouin asked the question in 1880: "Why should not the lesson on physics or history be employed as the theme of a lesson in German or French?" (cited in Kelly: 289) Already in the eighteenth century secondary schools had been established in Europe in which a foreign language was the exclusive medium of instruction. The renowned *Französisches Gymnasium* in Berlin, founded in the nineteenth century, set a precedent followed by the Soviet Union, which by 1963 had instituted thirty-two schools where the entire curriculum was taught in the foreign language (*ibid.*:

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290). The Hungarian government has recently launched experimental "dual language" schools. After one year of intensive instruction in a foreign language, students take social science and natural science courses in that language for four more years (see Snow this volume). Bilingual schools have a long tradition in communities where two languages are widely spoken—Belgium, Alsace-Lorraine, Russia, and Eastern Europe. The configuration of subjects taught in more than one language runs the gamut from the entire curriculum to isolated courses for the language minority pupils only. The French immersion programs in Canada, which today enroll over 250,000 students, have attracted keen interest (Genesee 1987; Swain 1988, 1991; Swain and Lapkin 1982), as have Canadian efforts to apply immersion at the university level (Brinton et al. 1989; Edwards et al. 1984; Sternfeld 1988; Wesche 1985). Substantial bilingual education programs at the elementary and secondary levels have sprung up recently in other countries as well (United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, the United States) to serve the children of immigrants and guest workers. Study abroad, finally, represents yet another well-established example of discipline-based language learning. Foreign study programs commonly offer participants opportunities to attend regular university courses in many different disciplines. It is generally assumed they will improve their language skills while at the same time absorbing (at least in part) the content of the course, a hypothesis largely untested.

The past two decades have produced a proliferation of efforts to integrate language study more systematically into the undergraduate curriculum. The call for change has come both from language professionals and from colleagues in other fields (Straight 1991; Metcalf this volume). Language faculty have restructured existing courses and developed new ones to incorporate topics not often taught in traditional language courses. Some departments have redefined the content of all their offerings to reflect better the communication tasks their students are likely actually to encounter and to improve articulation between their courses (Chaput this volume). Others have added new offerings tailored for professional content areas such as business, engineering, and medicine. Christine Uber Grosse and Geoffrey M. Voght (1990; 1991) have documented the astonishing number and variety of "language for special purposes" (LSP) courses which have been offered at higher education institutions since the early seventies. Private foundations and governmental funding agencies have in recent years underwritten programs at several colleges and universities that encourage interdisciplinary experiments involving foreign languages throughout the undergraduate curriculum.

An array of course models has emerged from these "foreign language across the curriculum" programs. Outside language departments, initiatives range from introducing into the syllabus specific classroom activities or homework assignments involving one or more foreign languages to establishing a whole series of courses in a social science conducted entirely in a second language. Another arrangement designates that one discussion section of a multi-section course conduct some or all of its work in the foreign language. These courses are typically taught by faculty outside the language departments who have good command of a non-English language. Language faculty, in turn, sometimes teach courses in other disciplines where they have expertise. They may take responsibility for the

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language section in a course team-taught with colleagues from other departments. A further possibility, an adjunct model, involves teaching a separate course in the target language which is paired with a course from another discipline. In this case, the language course deals with the challenges posed by the specialized discourse and academic tasks (from taking lecture notes to writing term papers) of the paired course. Finally, language faculty may also design language for special purposes courses, either as stand-alone offerings or integrated into an interdisciplinary degree program.

Just as the degree of interdisciplinary and interdepartmental cooperation varies from model to model, so, too, does the relative importance of language objectives versus subject matter objectives. In some cases instructors will likely attach more significance to learning the content of the paired discipline, while in other models language improvement will weigh heavier. At the conclusion of a hematology course in Spanish, for example, the professor presumably will be more concerned with the students' knowledge of the generation, anatomy, physiology, pathology, and therapeutics of blood, than with their improvement in the language; that will be a welcome bonus. Conversely, a course labeled "Conversational Spanish for Health Care Providers" will doubtless seek above all to improve learners' ability to communicate with Spanish-speaking patients. At the same time, however, one might reasonably expect significant dividends in both courses beyond the primary objectives. Even a native speaker of Spanish would likely gain a great deal of knowledge of Spanish medical discourse in the hematology course, while an accomplished language instructor would probably provide the health care workers considerable information about the health care needs, delivery systems, and cultural attitudes towards doctors and nurses which prevail in the Hispanic community.

The fundamental premise of discipline-based approaches to language study holds that students can successfully learn the content of an academic discipline and improve their foreign language proficiency at the same time. Extensive research on Canadian bilingual immersion programs indicates that learners can indeed accomplish both goals simultaneously. Proponents of discipline-based approaches reason that creating opportunities to apply second language skills to material in students' own area of interest will motivate them more forcefully than material which may be of little or no interest to them. Research suggests that greater subject area expertise, background knowledge, and metacognitive awareness which learners bring to material in their own fields enhance their ability to read and comprehend second language texts (Carrell 1989). Stephen Krashen's "input hypothesis," which maintains that language is acquired most effectively through rich comprehensible input with the conscious focus on message, not form (Krashen 1981; 1985; 1989), provides a further theoretical basis for the contention that second language proficiency can improve by concentrating on learning the content of an academic discipline through that language.

In this connection it is vital to note that the distinction between language objectives and the objectives of the linked discipline not be misconstrued as a strict dichotomy of language vs. content. Patricia Chaput makes an extremely valid point in her paper when she states how crucial it is that we make explicit

the content goals in our language courses. This holds equally true for interdisciplinary programs linking foreign language study to the study of other disciplines. To fail to do so creates the risk of again being perceived as teachers of skills without intellectual substance. In our view, learning the subject matter of any field of inquiry cannot be separated from learning its distinctive discourse, i.e. the complex ways it uses language to express and communicate its concepts and ideas. In the hypothetical hematology course mentioned above, learning the content of this branch of medical science implies *ipso facto* learning its specialized discourse; knowledge of the subject of hematology is joined inextricably with knowledge of its terminology, its modes of argument, its structures of acceptable evidence and proof. Nor can the specialized discourse of a particular discipline in one language simply be translated into a corresponding discourse in another language. For a student of Russian history, for example, truly to comprehend the discourse of Russian historians, it is not enough to read them in translation or to know general conversational Russian; he must become familiar with the specialized discourse of Russian historiography. Discipline-based approaches to language study recognize this distinction and the central role of foreign language educators in developing discourse competence.

Scholars experienced in discipline-based approaches warn, however, that there is nothing automatic about the amount of language learning achieved in various interdisciplinary models. Much will depend on course objectives, instructional techniques, and the language activities involved. As H. G. Widdowson cautions in this volume, even among courses where language objectives predominate, outcomes may vary immensely. A language for special purposes course with a narrowly defined purpose may not help learners gain much general competence to communicate in other contexts. What level of language proficiency is prerequisite to fruitful participation in a course where complex subject matter is taught through a foreign language? What adjustments and accommodations must course instructors make for the linguistic limitations of the students? A closely related question concerns the selection, preparation, and adaptation of appropriate materials, and the type and difficulty of assignments. These and other methodological questions raise deeper issues about the nature of language learning in these interdisciplinary courses. As several authors in this volume emphasize, we must not confine the language objectives to the expansion of vocabulary and the reinforcement of syntactic forms; beyond that students must gain familiarity with the characteristic genres, rhetorical patterns, and the specialized discourse of their field. Janet Swaffar outlines a pedagogy of content-based programs that through a sequence of carefully constructed tasks aims to develop in the learner cognitive strategies for analyzing and interpreting the rhetoric, logic, and intentionality of texts. Finally, it is also crucial to insure that courses throughout the entire language curriculum be arranged and structured so as to build students' linguistic and cognitive abilities systematically and coherently.

Only recently have foreign language scholars directed much attention to discipline-based (or content-based) foreign language study, and it is obvious that there is much yet to discover about how to maximize the acquisition process. The assortment of discipline-based programs requires that we clarify our instructional

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objectives—both language objectives and the objectives of the allied discipline—and that we examine which models, teaching techniques, and materials are best suited for reaching them. Much of the groundwork in this regard—both of a theoretical and methodological nature—has been laid by our colleagues in English As a Foreign (or Second) Language. Students in EFL/ESL classes at North American colleges and universities have readily identifiable language needs; they require improved English skills in order to perform well in university classes alongside their native-English speaking counterparts. Specifically, they need to comprehend academic lectures in a variety of fields, to take accurate notes, to participate in discussion sections, to read substantial amounts of academic material, and to write examinations, reports, and term papers. To help them acquire these skills, EFL/ESL professionals have pioneered course models, instructional techniques, and materials that take into account these specific contexts and purposes. So-called “content-based instruction” (CBI) has gained wide acceptance among EFL/ESL professionals and become the object of extensive research, analysis, evaluation, and theoretical debate (Brinton et al. 1989).

Foreign language specialists can learn much from this experience. The members of the Center for Language Studies at Brown University felt that the time had come for a major conference on the topic of integrating language study with other disciplines across the curriculum that would bring together representatives from EFL/ESL and other modern languages. The current volume collects the results of this gathering in Providence, Rhode Island, October 18–20, 1991. The organizers opted for the term “discipline-based” approaches to language study, rather than “content-based,” even though the latter term has gained rather wide currency in publications on the topic. “Content-based” instruction implies a contrasting “form-based” approach, presumably one concerned primarily with grammatical structure. Even if one allowed that grammar is essentially “form” and not “content,” we feel the term “content-based” masks the decisive element which makes these approaches innovative. Integrating language teaching with other academic disciplines (in addition to literature) opens language instruction to a much wider array of “contents,” not to content per se. By contrast, a “non-discipline based” approach implies a syllabus of randomly or loosely connected topics for classroom discussion and exercises, where no clear theme links one content topic to the next. Grammar rules of increasing difficulty generally determine the sequence of lessons, and other subject matter is general in nature and clearly subordinate to language learning per se.

OVERVIEW OF THE VOLUME

The March 1991 issue of the American Airlines in-flight magazine, *American Way*, published an article on English-language programs for Japanese students in North America in which it referred to “content-based instruction” as an exciting new concept in such settings. Mention of CBI in a publication for the general public underscores the widespread recognition this approach has garnered. However, the author overstates its novelty, for in actuality the approach is quite firmly