

5-2000

0606-1

# Overcoming Anarchy in the Advanced Language Class

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OCTOBER 1989 marked the ten-year anniversary of the publication of *Strength through Wisdom*, the report issued by the President's Commission on Foreign Languages and International Studies. Much has happened in the foreign language-teaching profession in the past decade. For example, many states have mandated more study of foreign languages in their high schools, and numerous colleges and universities have reinstated language requirements that were eliminated in the seventies. However, in spite of all the current activity in the secondary schools and the vigorous restructuring of university curricula at the lower levels of language instruction, one area that seems impregnable to change is the college-level advanced language class.

A sense of anarchy seems to pervade the typical advanced language class. More often than not, faculty members teaching these courses have no sense of where they are going or what they expect students to do—beyond perhaps a vague hope that students will be able to speak and write in the target language after completing the course. There is virtually no attempt to coordinate multisectioned classes, for these classes usually do not fall under the purview of the teaching-assistant coordinator at institutions where language instruction is carried out almost exclusively by graduate teaching assistants. If there is any articulation between one level and the next, it is superficial at best. And although grammar is reviewed again and again in the advanced language sequence, teachers of subsequent literature courses complain that most students cannot write or speak well enough to express themselves adequately in the language. These teachers, however, often fail to see themselves as part of either the problem or the solution. As Lambert points out, "We train millions of students up to what I call 'abominable fluency.' . . . [W]e really cannot talk about creating a useful pool of language competencies for the nation until we flesh out our instructional capacity at the higher skill levels" (3). The purpose of this paper is to address the chaotic teaching of productive skills (that is, speaking and writing) in advanced-level language classes, to point to major problems, and to offer a few potential solutions founded on empirically based research on second-language acquisition.

I will begin with a discussion of the "conversation course" as it is taught in the typical curriculum. The course is usually organized around topics selected by the instructor to form the basis of the daily discussion. The topics usually center on current events, both in this country and in the country of the target language. The class resembles an open forum: the instructor presents a series of questions or statements germane to the topic of the day, and the students are expected to respond. Most of these classes do not include formal instruction in grammar—the students are there simply to practice speaking in the target language.

Grading in such classes usually poses a problem because it is difficult for the instructor to be objective. Grading is based on such factors as students' attendance and apparent willingness to converse, rather than on any objective measure of improvement in speaking ability. Often these courses do not have textbooks, and to stimulate conversation, the instructor will frequently use photocopied selections from magazines and newspapers. The staffing of these classes is often reserved for native speakers, faculty members and teaching assistants who, in spite of having scored high enough on the TOEFL to be admitted to the graduate program, do not have sufficient proficiency in English to teach a lower-level language course, in which they would be expected to make elementary grammatical explanations in English. Because these courses are viewed within a language department as requiring little or no faculty preparation, chairs often assign them to reduce the faculty work loads without simultaneously reducing the course loads mandated by the administration.

If a sequence of conversation courses is offered, there is rarely any articulation of one level with the next: students in a higher level do a little more of what they did in the previous course. Furthermore, there is rarely

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any coordination of multisectioned conversation courses within a single level. It is not uncommon for students to petition the language department for permission to take a second conversation class at the same level after hearing from classmates in other sections that professor X's teaching method differs radically from their current teacher's. In essence, the attempts at building skills at this level lack systematic organization and tend to be, as Kalivoda says, "feeble and half-hearted" (14).

Much has been published in recent years on teaching techniques that can be used to enhance speaking skills. For example, Kramsch criticizes teacher-oriented control of the class, whereby the teacher is in complete charge of "turns at talk" and, as a consequence, is always next to speak after the student: "There is little motivation for students to listen to one another, and the only motivation to listen to the teacher is the fear of being caught short of an answer" (176). Kramsch goes on to suggest that we must teach students to initiate turns, since this skill is not automatically transferred from the native language, and she lists several rules for natural turn taking (177). Obviously, in a course where the instructor controls turns at talking, there is little opportunity to approach natural interaction among speakers. An effort must be made to "broaden the discourse options" (179). One way to maximize the discourse options in a conversation class is to resort to group work. Several researchers of second-language acquisition have pointed out the positive effects that this can have on language learners. Group work has the advantage of preparing students to use the target language in natural settings (Allwright), and it has been found that when the students control the turn-taking mechanism, each becomes intrinsically motivated to listen when another student or the instructor is speaking (Van Lier). Chaudron, in what is perhaps the most thorough review available of the research on second-language acquisition performed over the past thirty years, cites several recent studies that show that more language use, and possibly more complex and no less grammatically correct language use, can be expected when students interact with their peers in small groups (99).

One of the reasons professors adopt the traditional teacher-fronted method in the conversation course is to be able to monitor students' errors. Teachers using such traditional methods are sometimes reluctant to assign group work for fear that students will contaminate one another with their errors. A study carried out by Porter, however, shows that a mere 3% of the speaking errors made during group work are transferred from peer to peer. In an article that summarizes several research findings on second-language acquisition and their implications for the classroom, Van-Patten points out that one of the earth-shattering

findings, and one that "usually evokes argument among language teachers" (212), is that direct error correction by the professor does not promote linguistic accuracy. Three studies that support this finding were carried out by Plann, Holley and King, and Dvorak ("Grammatical Practice"). In classes where error correction was absent and where the activities had a communicative focus, students did not show poorer grammar than students showed in classes where mechanical practice and overt error correction accompanied the communicative activities. It is striking to note that, in fact, the uncorrected group tended to commit fewer errors in speaking (Dvorak, "Grammatical Practice").

There appears to be little coherence in the organization of many conversation courses. The premise seems to be that if the students do their homework and come to class the required number of times, they will become conversant in the target language after taking the courses for a semester or two. While the haphazard activities that characterize the traditional conversation course might increase the students' ability to express themselves, some important lexical, morphological, syntactic, or sociolinguistic features of the language might be overlooked. The features selected for practice may not be the most useful. The class practice must be diverse enough to make students competent in the hundreds of functions that a language serves. The only function that is now widely practiced in the traditional conversation course seems to be that of supporting opinion.

It is both frustrating and encouraging that potential solutions to these problems exist. Numerous lists of linguistic functions have been devised (van Ek and Alexander; Munby), and Guntermann and Phillips provide an extensive one that comprises over one hundred functions (26-31). Included are some of the most elementary functions, such as "greeting and taking leave of others," as well as more sophisticated ones, like "persuading, convincing, explaining, and hypothesizing." Such a list could serve not only to organize a single conversation course but also to provide continuity of courses from one level to the next. Identifying functions important for each level could make grading much more objective. A course grade would be based on a student's ability to carry out the linguistic functions on which the syllabus for the course focuses. This evaluation would give the instructor and the student a clearer picture of what the student can and cannot do with the language.

Conversation classes should be staffed with teachers who have a good command of the language and, equally important, who know the techniques to make a learner conversant in a language. Native speakers are not necessarily the best teachers of their language; graduate students pursuing literature degrees, for ex-

ample, may lack any interest or training in teaching their native language, though they are commonly hired to do so.

Let me now shift the discussion to the teaching of writing. Chastain points out that of the four basic language skills, writing has been considered the least important. Perhaps this is a result of the audiolingual revolution in teaching methodology, which favored development of speaking and listening skills over those of reading and writing. However, as the audiolingual approach gave way to the more communicative view of instruction that characterizes today's foreign language department, instruction remained relatively unaffected. It continued to be sacrificed to allow more time for developing the other three skills. The fallacy here is that students may have as many opportunities to write to native speakers as to talk with them (Chastain 245).

Raimes states that writing can be defined as the clear, fluent, and effective communication of ideas in print (8). For the past thirty years, however, as if in opposition to this definition, teachers of writing in a foreign language have been preoccupied with correctness, focusing on eliminating errors. As Chastain observes, "Most students, both in their native and in the second language, have received minimal or no instruction in learning to write [i.e., in writing as process]. They receive feedback—often unhelpful because it is incomprehensible to them—on the product they have submitted for correction and grading, but no one has led them through the process of generating ideas, organizing them into a coherent sequence and putting them on paper" (251). Murray stresses this point: "The process of making meaning with written language cannot be understood by looking backward from a finished page. Process cannot be inferred from product any more than a pig can be inferred from sausage. It is possible, however, for us to follow the process forward from blank page to final draft and learn something of what happens" (30). Teachers of composition both in foreign and in native language are often solely concerned with the product, the result of a writing assignment. English teachers' limited success in teaching composition skills has generated an enormous amount of research. The dimension of concern this subject raises is best measured not by the number of articles devoted to the problem of turning students into competent writers of their own language, but by the number of *journals* specializing in the topic (Dvorak, "Writing" 148).

In her now classic article on the teaching of writing in a native language, Hairston discusses how in the early eighties the English-teaching profession began to shift the emphasis from writing as product to writing as process (85). Writing as product is what we foreign language teachers are all familiar with: the assignment

typed double spaced on 8½-by 11-inch sheets of paper that we collect from the students at the middle or the end of the semester. Writing as process focuses on the series of interrelated choices that the writer makes in getting an idea to the page. Foreign language teachers have usually been most concerned with the grammaticality of what the student writes, not with the steps involved in getting ideas on paper.

Our emphasis on the product has created writers who concentrate on surface correctness, spelling, and grammar. Perl observes that by prematurely and rigidly attempting to correct their work, such writers inhibit the flow of composing without substantially improving the form of what they write (328). They have little concern for how a paragraph supports the main theme or for what follows naturally in the next paragraph. When they revise their work, they may focus on errors, like wrong words, and lose sight of the piece of writing as a whole. As Sommers explains, a process-oriented approach aims to teach the students to be flexible, to weigh various possibilities, and to rework their ideas. They are encouraged to add, drop, substitute, and reorder according to their sense of what the piece of writing needs for emphasis and clarity (381).

The view of writing as process has led to a new perspective on the evaluation of students' writing. The Garrison method, named after the professor who created it, is now used in some English programs and has received much acclaim. It employs the idea of conferencing—that is, having several short conversations with each student as the student develops a paper. During each meeting, the teacher discusses one aspect of the paper, such as content, purpose, audience, style, or mechanics. Each paper thus goes through a series of drafts, and the attention to surface correction that dominates the writing-as-product approach is placed at the very end of the process, where it belongs (Osterholm 130). We know how time-consuming it is to mark writing assignments and how likely students are to throw out the corrected papers after only a cursory look. Conferencing not only makes better use of the teacher's time but proves more helpful to students, who seem to learn more from oral remarks than from lengthy written comments. Furthermore, it appears that giving each student individual attention is more effective than instructing an entire group on errors that they all made (Osterholm 131).

Semke compares the effects of four methods of evaluating students' writing assignments in a foreign language class. With one group of papers she simply responded to the content of the assignment, with another she marked the grammatical errors and wrote in the corrections, with another she made positive comments and marked the errors, and with another she required the students to correct all errors that she had marked according to a code that indicated the

types of error. The results of the study showed that the students who received comments based solely on the content spent more time preparing the assignment that did the other three groups, made greater progress than did the others, and became more fluent writers. The students who were required to correct all their errors wrote shorter compositions, had the most negative attitudes, and repeated in future compositions the errors that had been corrected. Semke concludes that error correction is not the most important factor in enhancing writing skills. Furthermore, she notes that "students do not achieve more when they are forced to correct their own mistakes" (202). On the contrary, the findings of her study indicate that using a code to signal errors on the students' compositions, the most common method in writing classes in language departments, is the least effective way to improve students' achievement and attitudes.

Numerous advances are being made in both the teaching of writing and the teaching of speaking, as more and more empirically based studies on the acquisition of second languages appear. But who sees to it that faculty members teaching second languages remain abreast of developments related to their courses? While most recently appointed junior faculty members have had some exposure to research on second-language acquisition, it was probably during the first semester of graduate school, in a course required of all first-year graduate students and usually taught by a teaching-assistant coordinator. Such courses usually are stopgap measures designed to instill classroom survival skills in the neophyte teaching assistant, and they rarely, if ever, address language instruction beyond the department's lower-level required-course sequence. Thus, new assistant professors who are assigned upper-level language courses entailing the teaching of conversation or writing skills have little training to carry out the task. Their idea of what produces results may be based primarily on their impressions and lack an empirical foundation derived from the latest research. Moreover, both junior and senior teachers may teach an advanced-level language course as a "service" course, because they are primarily practicing or aspiring literary critics and, consequently, are often not abreast of the latest research on language teaching. Hence, too few know anything about such concepts as language function, discourse options, turns at talk, topic management, and writing as process. And yet, we know from the Berwald study that language (not literature) classes dominate the course assignments of junior faculty members (84). Perhaps graduate programs ought to include courses designed to train advanced teaching assistants in the problems of the advanced-level language class, before the assistants must face those problems as professionals. Graduate foreign language departments must recognize that

along with training literary critics they are, after all, also preparing language teachers.

Sometimes in order to make teaching an advanced language class a little easier, a faculty member will simply follow the material in a textbook. The problem with this method, as Dvorak has pointed out, is that the foreign language texts that have changed the least in the past twenty-five years are those designed for courses beyond the second-year level (147). Lambert corroborates this when he says that "our textbooks and materials peter out at the higher level skills" and asks where the texts and techniques are that will bring a student to a level close to that of a native speaker (3). It is not likely that the situation will improve soon; the market for innovative advanced-level materials is so small that few publishers will take the economic risk of producing them. Nevertheless, some publishers have made honest attempts to create innovative texts, and examples of these efforts include Bragger and Rice; Chastain and Guntermann; Kramsch and Crocker; and Valdés, Dvorak, and Hannum. Such texts, however, can become as useless as a screen door on a submarine if the instructor using them is unfamiliar with the empirical findings on which these innovative materials are based. One solution is to have faculty members who are familiar with research on second-language acquisition coordinate the efforts of the instructors teaching these courses. The guiding faculty members could also ensure that these courses are formally articulated from one level to the next by delineating objectives and not simply seeing to it that all the instructors are using the same materials.

Considering the split between language and literature that historically has existed in virtually all language departments, perhaps it is understandable that efforts to improve language teaching may fail to interest the practicing or aspiring literary critic. Language departments have to become more practical and liberate themselves from what Swaffar calls the "elitist strait-jacket" and "high culture" standard for language learning (56). Tonkin recommends that language departments recognize that they are involved in two activities: training students to learn languages and training students to interpret literature (7). As Long points out, the language-teaching profession still lacks the standards of accountability routinely demanded of other professions, such as medicine, engineering, and law (98). The language department's failure to teach practical and functional skills is documented in Carroll's classic study, where he found that language majors, after four years at American universities and colleges, failed to achieve minimal competence (148). Along these lines, Kalivoda, discussing the growth of discontent among the general public over the perceived failure of language departments to teach language, warns that these departments may lose responsibility

for language teaching, for it could be assumed by language centers or institutes. He cautions that language departments resting on content-oriented teaching may be misassessing the security of their positions. He warns that, while some professors would welcome freeing the college curriculum from lower-division courses, "this would eventually destroy the foreign language departments since it would hit at the core of students" (15).

Lambert was correct in 1985 when he stated that "the field of language pedagogy has been singularly unempirical" and that "in place of carefully mounted experiments comparing various teaching strategies we have periodic waves of advocacy for totally new approaches, each one declaring its predecessors totally worthless and obsolete on the basis of extravagant assertion" (3). We are now, however, beginning to see the fruits of carefully conducted studies that can provide new insights for language teachers. The next step is to make all faculty members more aware of empirically based findings in second-language acquisition, in order to improve the overall quality of language instruction that we give our students. Coordination, articulation, and implementation of informed teaching techniques will help to overcome the anarchy that currently characterizes the advanced-level language class and will truly begin to produce a pool of highly competent speakers and writers of the foreign languages we teach.

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