

## TOWARD THE INTEGRATION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE TEACHING AT ALL LEVELS OF THE COLLEGE CURRICULUM

ONE of the most unfortunate features of foreign language departments in the universities of the United States is the split between language and literature that frequently amounts to a split between "language faculty" and "literature faculty." Many of us sense that such a division undermines and weakens the enterprise of teaching American students the languages and literatures of other nations, and yet we have chosen on the whole to accept it as a fact of our profession, working with it or around it as best we can. We do so for the very good reason that it derives from seemingly intractable problems rooted in the educational system.

American students often begin their college careers with no preparation at all in a foreign language, or else with a very meager high school preparation. They have to be taught a language if they are to study literature in that language. This necessity would be entirely obvious to a casual outside observer. For the most part, however, the professoriat of foreign language departments wishes that it were not so, that students had learned the language before they came to college or that they could miraculously acquire it at top speed. Then the greater part of the college curriculum could be taught at what we all regard as "college level," namely, the linguistic level at which one can read, discuss, and write about the great classics of foreign literature in the original language. We wish, in other words, that we were dealing with something akin to the relatively select group of students from the "lycées," "licei," "Gymnasien," and so on of Western Europe, who have been rigorously taught a foreign language for some five to eight years before coming to sit at the feet of their university professors of literature. The wish is understandable since, after all, our training, research, and interests are primarily in literature, not in language pedagogy, but it is surely rather foolish to build an entire university curriculum on nothing more tangible than a wish.

The European system that nurtures our fantasies is in fact much more realistic than we are. Nowhere in Europe are students expected to acquire a foreign language at such speed with so little intensive concentration and develop it to such a high level in such a short time. It is small wonder that the average American student does not manage this feat and that Americans have such a poor reputation for foreign language mastery.

Most of us, as foreign language and literature professors, do not really want to talk about this situation. If we were to admit that four years of intermittent instruction are simply not enough to do what we say we do, then

*Ernst Fedor Hoffmann and Dorothy James*

would we not be cutting the academic ground from under our feet? Would we not, to speak plainly, be threatening our livelihood? To the dismay of many, such questions have begun to be forced into the open by the recent ferment of activity in foreign language instruction across the country, inspired by the attempt to adapt for academe the standards of proficiency in active language use developed in the professional context of the US Foreign Service. The uneasy peace of many foreign language departments has been disturbed. Professors have come back to their campuses from ACTFL and ETS workshops talking about such things as levels of functional proficiency, rating scales, linguistic tasks. Their colleagues have reacted with predictable apprehension, frequently suggesting that such an orientation promotes "skills" to the detriment of "literature." Again, an outside observer would probably find this kind of dichotomy hard to understand, given the general assumption that without language skills, literature must remain forever beyond students' grasp. An observer, however, would not be working within the framework that we insiders know so well, where the teaching of literature to undergraduates legitimizes our standing as professors and the teaching of language does not.

As professors in the Hunter College German Department, we are as concerned about our standing as the next professor. We are prepared to raise these thorny problems in public because we can report that our own experiments with the ACTFL proficiency rating system have not undermined our literature program, nor have they led us to replace the teaching of literature with the teaching of language. They have, on the contrary, opened up new possibilities for making the teaching of German literature to American undergraduates a legitimate educational enterprise, one in which we can face and work with the real problems of developing high-level linguistic ability in a short time, instead of acting as if these problems were not there. We would like to suggest that, far from driving a further wedge between the language and the literature teacher, the ACTFL proficiency rating system can pro-

*Both authors are Professors of German at Hunter College and the Graduate School, City University of New York.*

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vide a splendid tool for uniting the two in the common task of making real sense out of the university curriculum in foreign languages and literature.

## I

After working with this rating system at Hunter for close to four years, we are now in the early stages of an attempt to recast our entire curriculum. Our department is small—far too small to allow hierarchical distinctions between teachers of language and teachers of literature. This has undoubtedly given us a head start, since to do what we are trying to do, it is important that those people who are teaching upper-level literature courses should also teach elementary language courses. We have only five full-time teachers of professorial rank and some five to seven part-time teachers. An oral proficiency testing workshop by one of us early in 1983 was the starting point for our curricular reform. First we learned to conduct oral proficiency interviews, listening with a new ear to our students, becoming ever more aware of the levels of proficiency through constant reference to these levels in interviewing and rating. From there, we have proceeded to the point where we are creating an integrated language and literature program from the beginning course right through to the end of the literature major. Oral proficiency testing was the catalyst. The curricular development that we are attempting goes far beyond the testing itself, but it would have been impossible without it. There is no shortcut.

Only by conducting many interviews oneself can one understand the descriptions of the various language levels and appreciate the important fact that they are indeed descriptions, nothing more or less than that. They are not theoretical statements about how people learn languages. They are not prescriptive statements about how they ought to learn. They are purely and simply descriptions of how people speak at various stages of mastery of the spoken language. Resting as they do on some thirty years of practical experience at a number of US government agencies, they have the authority of solid empirical data that one can readily test again and again in one's own interviews.<sup>1</sup> While as testers we may quibble about details of the descriptions as now set out in the *ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines*, we can consistently demonstrate, across a wide variety of speakers from a wide variety of linguistic and educational backgrounds, the validity of the descriptions in broad outline and the inevitability of the sequential order of functional mastery that they reveal. It is this sequential order—not ideal, not postulated, not prescribed, but simply shown to exist—that injects a new realism into curricular planning.

It was clear from our earliest interviews of students at various levels of our program that we were dealing largely with the Novice, Intermediate, and Advanced levels of the ACTFL scale. This experience echoed that of others who have tested American college students and found that for-

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eign language majors rated 2 or 2+ (Advanced, Advanced-Plus) at the end of their senior year (Carroll). An Advanced speaker cannot do what a Superior (level 3) speaker can do, namely, state and defend opinions, describe in detail, hypothesize, or deal with abstract topics. Even an Advanced-Plus speaker can do these things only intermittently. What were such speakers doing in our upper-level literature courses, which are conducted entirely in German? Were they progressing in any discernible way as speakers of the language? Were they progressing in reading, writing, and comprehending? Were they in any real sense studying German literature on the level that we were presenting it? It seemed to us that we really did not know. The A's and B's that they were getting in one literature course after another did not measure progress in linguistic ability. If our students never achieved the Superior level of active participation in speaking and writing, could we even be satisfied that they were operating at a Superior level of comprehension of the spoken and written word?

The oral interviews that we were conducting at the lower levels certainly measured some early progress in speaking and aural comprehension through the Novice and Intermediate ranges and showed that students entering our major courses from the foreign language requirement (4 semesters, 3 hours a week) were usually rated Intermediate-Mid or at most Intermediate-High. This meant that they were at best only just beginning to be able to join sentences together in connected discourse. They were at best beginning to be able to describe, report, and narrate. In other words, they were not yet operating actively at the Advanced level, still less at the Superior level, which encompasses the discursive abilities normally associated with the study of literature.

It appeared then that we were taking students at the Intermediate level and, as it were, catapulting them directly into a situation requiring Superior-level skills, bypassing altogether the crucial middle ground. We had no choice but to rethink our upper-level program if we were to have any hope of guiding our students along that long and difficult road through the Advanced level toward the Superior level of our literary aspirations.

## II

What could we do with our upper-level literature courses? Oral and writing proficiency tests had given us two specific tools that we did not have in the past: (1) the ability to determine each student's active proficiency level and (2) the attendant ability to set precise and realistic goals in speaking and writing for individual students. Listening comprehension can to some extent be evaluated by oral interview, and we began to consider ways of evaluating reading skills, but we determined to work temporarily with what we knew of students' active skills. For the first time we knew quite a lot and could formulate it

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in precise terms. Above all, there could be no doubt that the learner of German (or French or Spanish) had to be able first to narrate and describe past, present, and future events and circumstances before he or she could be expected to speak or write about abstract topics, support an opinion on its intellectual merits, or present hypotheses and their possible consequences.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, our experience in discussing literary texts in undergraduate and graduate classes over the years had taught us something else that is obvious to every teacher of literature but that gains significance in the light of our new understanding of the sequential order of functional mastery: namely, that simple factual questions about a work of literature are not always easy to answer.

Factual statements about the content or form of a text can cover a whole spectrum of difficulty. At one end of the spectrum, simply retelling the content, or telling it from a different point of view, can enhance the understanding of narrative technique. At the other end are much more demanding tasks. Comparisons of subjective accounts with the objective facts underlying them can, for example, be an exercise of some significance in such sophisticated narratives as Goethe's *Werther*. Even a straightforward paraphrase of content is a challenging task when the student is dealing with a difficult poem such as a sonnet by Rilke. Thus, while reporting or describing calls for a relatively low level of foreign language proficiency, it may require a sophisticated level of literary understanding. Inversely, while the student of language finds it difficult to master hypothetical statements, there are "literary tasks" that demand this ability but do not demand much literary expertise: "What would have happened if Little Red Riding Hood had had better eyesight and had recognized the wolf in grandmother's bed?"

In short, it seemed to us that the linguistic and literary levels of difficulty were not dependent on each other. A student's limited foreign language skill need not interfere with the intellectual level of the literary questions asked. We could set equally challenging tasks for all students in spite of their different foreign language proficiencies—we merely had to ask the right student the right kind of question.

The problem of students with widely differing foreign language skills in advanced classes may be particularly pressing in New York City. All our students in a given junior or senior year may have roughly the same amount of literary training and understanding, but their knowledge of the foreign language may (and usually does) range all the way from a fifth-semester learner (Intermediate-High) to an educated native speaker (upper ranges of Superior). This has in the past created considerable problems in teaching and grading. There are striking discrepancies particularly in speaking and writing abilities, and the effect in the classroom can be dangerously divisive. The "solution" of allowing some students to speak and write in English satisfied no one—neither students nor teacher. Knowing the order in which decisive foreign language

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functions are acquired and acknowledging our freedom to adjust literary and linguistic demands separately, we now seem to have the means to overcome this problem.

For the specific purpose of setting individualized writing and speaking goals in literature courses, we need to distinguish above all between two groups: those who have to work first at improving their ability to narrate, report, and describe (group A) and those who can support opinions, present arguments, hypothesize, and so on (group B). We can limit ourselves to these two groups, since students who have not achieved the ability to describe at all should not be in a literature course and students who need not improve their ability to present clear and convincing arguments are rare, even among native speakers. At the Advanced level, foreign language students have reached a stage where progress from one decisive function to the next is slow, so that a student will usually take more than one semester to move from one group to the other.

Once we know which students belong in group A, which in group B, and which are on the point of moving from one group to the other, we can take this knowledge into account as far as possible in our class discussions and we can apply it quite pointedly in our writing assignments. For each paper or examination, we now prepare two types of questions: some directed at group A and others directed at group B. Usually more than one of each type is supplied, and some can be directed especially at the "straddlers." Students are advised, individually, which questions are most suitable for them. They may disregard that advice if they wish, but few do, since the whole approach is explained to them and most respond positively to it.

An example of parallel sets of questions might be: (type A) Describe the events in Brentano's poem "Lore Lay." Where and when does the action take place? How do we know? What are the most important events? Order them chronologically and show their connection; (type B) Would it have been better if the judge had condemned her to death ("den Stab gebrochen")? Why (What would have happened)? Why not? What seems to be the poet's opinion?

All papers are corrected with indications of foreign language errors or weaknesses according to a correction code. Rewriting is required or suggested as seems necessary. The content of the paper—strengths and weaknesses in dealing with the literary topic—is commented on marginally as well as at the end. These procedures remain essentially what they have always been. There is, however, a change in evaluating and grading procedures. It derives from the student's level of proficiency as assessed at the beginning of the semester. The first written paper is returned to the student with a statement entitled "Goals and Next Steps." It sets the tasks in foreign language writing that we expect the student to attempt during the semester and suggests useful steps toward this goal. Subsequent evaluation of foreign language work during the term and indeed that part of the final grade which

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reflects language are based on the individual's advance toward the goal set.

So far this approach has proved generally successful and has pointed the way to an overall improvement in the quality of instruction in advanced-level literature courses, not only because students can progress more systematically and be evaluated more fairly in their linguistic ability, but also because the actual level of substantive work has been raised. Far from interfering with the course's demands in literary understanding and development of critical awareness, our approach to writing encourages the less advanced students to read carefully and describe precisely. Their insights into literature are likely to be more valid than when they are being taxed beyond their ability in writing assignments and are tempted simply to parrot the opinions of others. At the same time more advanced students (including native speakers), who are linguistically capable of handling argument and discussion, are expected to work at that level and cannot achieve high grades merely by performing correctly language tasks that do not develop their critical ability and powers of expression.

### III

The place of literature in our proficiency-oriented curriculum has thus remained absolutely central. Our program, from the first semester on, is predicated on the assumption that some students will indeed progress through the entire sequence of courses to become actively literate participants in our most advanced literature courses. We do not subscribe to the notion, sometimes voiced, that the creation of a proficiency-oriented curriculum means an emphasis in beginning language courses on so-called conversational skills. Not that we underestimate the importance of conversational skills: properly defined, they are among the most difficult to acquire and the most challenging to teach. Defining them, as we do, as the skills that ultimately enable a person to engage in intellectual discourse in a foreign tongue, they have to be taught from the beginning in conjunction with the other skills a literate person needs: reading, writing, and aural comprehension. We use oral proficiency interviews systematically to check the speaking levels reached by our students at the end of the first and second years, and we are beginning to establish the use of proficiency tests in the three other skills. At the same time, we conduct traditional achievement tests, and we also rigorously teach and test the knowledge of German grammar.

We know now from our testing experience that students who have been taught all the basic grammar of the German language in the four-semester foreign language requirement will very probably be Intermediate-Mid or -High speakers, who can, to be sure, hold up their end of everyday face-to-face conversations but do so only with a good deal of grammatical inaccuracy. This seems to be not an unreasonable achievement for students who cease

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their formal study of German at that point. On the other hand, if those same students want to go on to upper-level courses, then the fact that they can produce grammatically accurate language on paper is important groundwork for the kind of advance into the higher levels of literacy that we will expect them to make. Our own comparison of achievement tests with proficiency interviews shows that we can hardly avoid a discrepancy in accuracy between paper knowledge and conversational ability at the early stages of learning a language. It is in the upper-level courses that we hope to lessen this gap as we help our students move sequentially through the mastery of necessary functions.

It should be noted that our use of the word "function" differs from the much narrower sense prevailing in discussion of the "functional-notional" teaching approach, where "function" can be applied to any form of intention on the part of a speaker, from the expression of pleasure or sorrow to a request to pass the butter. Such functions, however useful they may be in teaching practice, do not fall into any necessary hierarchy of mastery. The functions of proficiency-oriented foreign language evaluation do, and they must be viewed together with the two other key aspects of the total speaking performance: content and accuracy. Intermediate-level functions—for example, asking and answering questions—can be adequately performed in the Intermediate-level content area of everyday survival topics with a relatively low level of grammatical accuracy. As students proceed through the Advanced-level functions of expressing facts, reporting, and narrating, the content areas with which they can deal multiply and the need for accuracy increases. As they approach the Superior level, precise structural control and grammatical accuracy become indispensable since one simply cannot perform the Superior-level tasks without these skills.

Our newly planned literature courses will, we hope, encourage this kind of functional progress and develop students' cultural awareness as well as their literate use of a large and diversified vocabulary. But they will remain literature courses, with primary emphasis on the teaching of literature. To support these courses, we are now offering some courses at the advanced level in which the total concentration is on language use.

While it is realistic for us to expect reasonably good students to reach Intermediate-Mid or even -High in oral proficiency after our first four semesters, those same students cannot possibly go on moving up through the levels at the rate of one a semester. They will not necessarily even cross the threshold from Intermediate-High into Advanced in one or even two more three-hour courses, and to move on through the Advanced level to the threshold of Superior may well take the rest of those students' college careers in German. To help our students make a smooth and rational transition from the elementary and intermediate courses into the literature major, we are offering a two-course sequence in advanced conversation

and composition that may be taken simultaneously with our first-level literature courses. These language courses work precisely on the threshold between the Intermediate-High and Advanced levels in speaking and writing. Here, as in the literature courses, we work from an exact knowledge of the students' levels of proficiency in these skills, and we provide individual goals and guidelines for every student. The course materials are organized around two methods. The one aims at precise patterned mastery of specific linguistic tasks and emphasizes accuracy. The other involves more open-ended activity on the functional-notional model: students are not constrained to work rigidly within the level where they can maintain grammatical accuracy but are guided in developing beyond it at an individual pace. The emphasis is on widening active vocabulary and idiom and encouraging attempts at more complex utterances.

Later in the major course sequence, and coordinated with our highest level literature courses, we offer an advanced German grammar course. Here, in keeping with the needs of the students who aspire to Superior-level proficiency, the concentration is on accuracy. We work in a quite old-fashioned way with such things as the memorization of principal parts of strong verbs (achievement-tested), but we also stress usage. While the complex grammatical forms needed for Superior-level argument are taught and practiced, the course does not lose sight of the need to consolidate the Advanced-level function of narration in all time frames; throughout the semester, the students write narratives, tell stories in class, and retell stories that have been orally presented. The role of grammatical accuracy in aural and reading comprehension is also taken into account. For reading comprehension, we analyze in detail portions of texts being read in the parallel upper-level literature courses, using, for example, portions of Fontane's *Irrungen Wirungen* when examining the grammatical construction of extended attributive adjectival and participial phrases, and portions of Kafka's *Der Prozess* when dealing with the use of the subjunctive. In this course, as in our entire program, literature and language go hand in hand.

In our department we are, as we have said, in the early stages of our curricular reform. We are making serious attempts to bring undergraduate students with no previous knowledge of German to a level of linguistic ability genuinely commensurate with the college-level study of literature. The results will be measurable, and perhaps we shall fail. Certainly we have not succeeded in the past by turning a blind eye to the problems involved. Equally certainly, our goals will not be achieved separately in language *or* literature classes, by language *or* literature teachers. The enterprise is one.<sup>3</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See the *ETS Oral Proficiency Testing Manual*: "Beginning in the 1950's, the interview with its related scale became *the* measure used by the foreign service to describe the language ability of both students undergoing training at the Foreign Service Institute and others out in the field" (5).

<sup>2</sup> The *ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines* provide language-specific descriptions for German, French, and Spanish. The *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* of 1986 provide generic descriptions only.

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