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How Do You Get There from Here? Articulating the Foreign Language Major Program

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AFTER a number of years of gloom, foreign language professionals find themselves in a period of renewed optimism: for some languages, such as Chinese, Japanese, and Russian, enrollments are dramatically on the rise; for others, a line of steady decline seems finally to have bottomed out. Though often bearers of less than cheerful news, even the major commission reports that dealt with the disastrous lack of foreign language abilities in American society have helped thrust language-related concerns into the national limelight.

This state of affairs should not, however, lull us into a false sense of security. Under no circumstance should we equate the perceived current interest in languages by the American public with our own long-standing professional interpretations of what it means to study a foreign language. For example, while we have generally taken as central the humanistic orientation of foreign language study, culminating in the informed reading of the literature of the language, it seems that language study nowadays is just as likely to be motivated by pragmatic considerations of the marketplace. I do not wish to dichotomize these two orientations and downplay one at the expense of the other. But in no sense is the current situation a license to return to business as usual on our part.

I would like to identify three components of the current situation that have a crucial impact on the shape and scope of our foreign-language-major programs, helping us to get from here to there.

1. Let me begin with the issue of accountability. Whether one uses the catchwords *accountability*, *outcome statements*, *truth in advertising*, or *seeking excellence or returning to it*, the issue is that for society in general, and for the individual students we serve in particular, the value of what we do depends on the impact we have on the students' lives. For some this impact concerns what they can do; for others, who they are or can yet become. Either way, unless we force ourselves to state in precise terms what it is that we intend to deliver, how we plan to go about delivering it, and what will count as proof of success, the cur-

rent interest will once more give way to the perception of the marginal relevance or even utter irrelevance of our work for the functions of society as a whole.

2. I have already alluded to the potential dichotomy between the pragmatic, market-oriented perception of language as merely a tool for something else, be that in business, or government, or international relations, and the profession's encompassing view of the humanistic value of language study. This essay is not the forum for debating this matter. But we must be concerned that on the one hand we proclaim the value of freedom of choice and on the other hand we severely distrust students when they make their choices about what kinds of language programs they wish to have. In other words, even to the sympathetic observer it is not always clear whether we resist change because we are thoroughly convinced that certain standards and values remain in force even under different circumstances or whether our steadfastness is not at times more akin to a false nostalgia, at best, or professional fossilization, at worst. Either way, I am afraid the burden of proof is on us, not on our clients.

3. Finally, within the profession itself the new climate for foreign language study has been accompanied by a sense of realism, of what is doable and what is likely to be out of our reach under our particular instructional circumstances. After a long period of vagueness about projected outcomes, an indecisiveness that led to inflated and virtually useless statements about curriculum planning and execution, a sense of the possible and the likely seems at last to have won out. Strongly associated with the so-called proficiency movement, this sense of realism is in no small part responsible for the professional renewal currently under way. For the first time, it seems appropriate to own up to what foreign language programs can

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achieve and not to blissfully promise the unattainable and subsequently feel guilty when the impossible goals have not been reached. Attendant to this orientation is the realization of the importance of foreign language pedagogy, coupled to insights about language acquisition, typically the domain of applied linguistics. It is high time that this sense of realism be spread even more vigorously throughout the profession and that it include the learners, the program administrators and supervisors, and, ultimately, the public at large.

Given those characteristics of the current climate, how do we get there from here? It may sound somewhat banal, but both the "here"—in other words, the starting point—as well as the "there"—the goals of foreign-language-major programs—can profit from closer scrutiny. Let us begin with the "here."

I find it curious that in recent years, even as a number of states have upgraded their foreign language curricula and requirements, postsecondary institutions hardly seem to have taken note of this fact. A flip-pant answer would assert that perhaps the changes are not noteworthy enough. But I am afraid matters are considerably more serious. Discussion at a recent meeting of the Association of University Coordinators and Supervisors indicated that placement of incoming freshmen continues to be an exceedingly haphazard activity, likely not only to play administrative havoc with the system at the beginning of the semester but, more seriously, to undercut dangerously the very gains that presumably were intended, if not always attained, with the new rulings for the secondary level. In other words, there seems to be an almost total lack of articulation between these two levels. This lack is all the more surprising since colleges have traditionally alleged shortcomings in the instructional outcomes of high schools, allegations that would presume a detailed awareness of these outcomes. In reality, however, neither high school nor college program progressions or outcomes are stated in terms of textbook-independent, seat-time-independent, grade-independent functional language ability, which would seem the only standard that could and should be applied. Consequently it is virtually impossible to establish a seamless transition and, ultimately, to build on the gains of what has come before, so as to enhance the results of what is to be done in the future.

There are numerous ways of going about this crucial task. In the most recent past the concept of proficiency seems to have contributed the most to this needed articulation. It is my opinion that, at times, the claims for proficiency-oriented programs or for proficiency testing have been overstated. In most cases, particularly at the lower levels of instruction, it is considerably more appropriate to speak about "proachievement testing." This concept combines the assessment of global, functionally oriented language ability with

the important ascertainment of knowledge of certain elements that have been explicitly taught in a given instructional program, traditionally summarized under the term *achievement*. Even so, the proficiency orientation seems like a step in the right direction, particularly if all skill modalities are addressed.

A second level of articulation between high school and college is one that I will term *learner progression*. Rightly or wrongly, colleges often feel compelled to do remedial work, filling in gaps that somehow were not properly attended to in high school. This kind of deficit approach reflects basic assumptions about the process of language learning that I believe recent experience with proficiency testing has discredited thoroughly. Instead of a linear, additive progression that steadily and steadfastly piles on new information, a more appropriate sequence allows for cyclical reentry and expansion of certain key features in a progressively more elaborated fashion and does not presume that *taught* equals *learned* equals *used* equals *internalized* material or that learners progress the same way irrespective of the level of their language ability.

Ultimately such an articulation would spell out more clearly what is teachable and learnable at the high school level and what is more appropriate for the college level. After all, the learners have entered into a decisively different stage of their cognitive and academic development. Should not their language teaching and learning reflect this as well?

The third level of articulation, that of expectations, is intimately tied to the second. It needs little elaboration, beyond noting that both sides have a tremendous amount of talking to do to each other in order to dispel years of mistrust and false perceptions or woefully inadequate awareness of key features of the working environment of the other. Again, I feel that the impetus for improving this state of affairs should be greatest on the part of the college faculties, working together with the high school faculties in a spirit of cooperativeness and learning that has the best interests of the students at heart.

I have purposely elaborated on the definition of the starting point of college programs, believing that much can be done here that would have a significant impact on what we can ultimately achieve.

My next point concerns program considerations within the college. Here one of the key issues is that of satisfying a variety of masters, to which I refer, in a shorthand fashion, as the language component, the literature component, and the area studies component. But before we go into these details, let us look at a few overriding issues.

At many institutions majors are not identified until the second half of the sophomore year. Thus language majors typically undergo their initial language training with students who are perhaps fulfilling a lan-

guage requirement or who have otherwise elected to take a language. I do not presume to have the answers for each institutional setting, but I believe that language departments should exert every effort to identify majors early on, preferably upon entry during the freshman year. This proposal is, of course, directly connected to the success with which the previously discussed issue of articulation is resolved. Aside from the obvious advantage of early identification for establishing a separate intensive track for majors, it seems that only through vigorous cooperative efforts will incoming students obtain a sense of their abilities and of the significance that a department and its faculty members attach to those abilities, ultimately making the decision to major in a language that much more attractive.

After identification of this restricted and highly goal-oriented group, it would seem that the necessary administrative support could in fact be argued for if the key goal in this effort—the capability for incorporating another level of solid language teaching—is specified. By that I mean language teaching in the sophomore year at the Advanced to Superior level of oral language ability and at the Advanced Plus level in listening and reading. I am here using the ACTFL proficiency designation in its generic sense, without necessarily endorsing it as the sole approach.

In that context permit me to make the following observation: we generally feel comfortable teaching an introductory language course; we are already less sure about the articulation between introductory and intermediate courses and lack considerably in evidence about what it means to learn a language at this level. Finally, at what should be the advanced level we are so bereft of substantive knowledge that we typically abandon the progression altogether and teach conversation or literature courses or simply go to any of a wide variety of topics that are deemed necessary for a foreign language major. Not only do our course offerings reflect this increasing uncertainty, our materials parallel it as well. At the same time we are painfully aware that most students are being asked to perform at a communicative level for which they do not even begin to have the linguistic enablers. This discrepancy leads to tremendous levels of frustration, in teacher and learner alike, and even to a dangerous pattern whereby upper-division courses frequently revert to English as the medium of instruction, either overtly or covertly. *or to teaching native speakers*

Another component of my proposal is that it would permit sophomores to advance to such a level of performance that study-abroad stays during their junior year would in fact be maximally beneficial instead of leading only to marginal results in academic-level language use.

Let us play this scenario out further. Presumably for

the remaining two years of study we would have about six to eight courses left. Let us begin with the literature component, usually of greatest concern. To return to our theme of the possible and the likely in undergraduate education, it is simply in the category of the impossible to hope to offer a differentiated look at the literature of the target culture. Given that fact, we might wish to reassess the standard literature survey course and its role. Perhaps we should first provide our students with a course, during the second half of that advanced level of language instruction in the sophomore year, that allows them to gain a metalinguistic awareness of the workings of the target language, with particular emphasis on its diverse textual, and ultimately literary, manifestations. Whether we call the course text-linguistic or semiotic, there would be great value in incorporating it before the unrestricted literature courses. Its purpose would be to open up for students a basic heuristic that targets the relation of language form, including that codified in literary genres and styles, and communicative intent or message or meaning. Subsequently, the survey course might perhaps be better understood as a masterworks course for the major literary periods, leaving it up to any other specific courses to go for depth.

Similar to the dilemma of the inventorylike survey of the literature course is the problem of the civilization survey course, which runs the risk of deteriorating into an amalgamation of individual facts to be forgotten as rapidly as possible. I am not at all a proponent of sacrificing the so-called high-C Cultural achievements of the target-language culture on the altar of everyday cultural phenomena of less than passing interest or of going to an exclusive area studies orientation. Here, too, we must ask ourselves what our goals can be at the undergraduate level. We may again find that less is more, that, given the circumstances, lasting impact is likely to be achieved more with in-depth treatment of selected cultural features within the chronological sequencing generally adhered to than with a claim to comprehensiveness.

Finally, we now also have a highly pragmatic wing in our foreign-language-major house, typically designated by the terms *Business French* or *German* or *Spanish*. I believe that this is altogether appropriate, as long as general language ability is of such a quality as to make branching out into highly specialized language use a real possibility rather than, once again, a haven for unfulfillable promises.

Although I can allude to them only briefly, let me mention two other important points before addressing my final topic. These concern the relationship between the foreign language major and the university and the issue of staffing.

While foreign languages are currently enjoying a respite from the state of siege, we should not forget the

0665-4

never mind other areas?
should the old idea that pedagogy is not a specialization


important work of anchoring ourselves within the university as a whole. Such an anchoring enhances not only our presence within the scholarly community, and ultimately our political say, but also our majors' programs. We must find ways in which foreign languages are tied in fact, and not only in spirit, to the humanities, to English and English literature programs, to history, art, philosophy, theology, and so on. This should be done in a coordinated fashion so that the end product is not a mere amalgamation of courses but a coherent whole where one component enhances the other. For the pragmatic orientation, too, whether it is business or economics or international relations, we must make our presence felt and act as convincing advocates for combining these fields with ours, instead of subtly or, more often, overtly considering such a combination a deficit or an unwelcome intrusion.

Of course, it is only through favorable staffing that these goals can be achieved. Just for the sake of argument let me propose an ideal situation, in which all full-time faculty members of the department are involved in language teaching as well as in their own specializations. I am aware of the momentous difficulties involved here, but, whatever the particular institutional setting and particular personnel and personality configurations may be, I believe the proposal is a legitimate goal and perhaps the single most important feature in getting us from here to there. Along the road many hurdles will have to be tackled, and the likelihood of smooth progress is probably slim. Nevertheless, even tentative solutions will often obtain a salutary effect for an entire department.

Finally, let us consider the outcomes of our programs. Having advocated a functional use-oriented stance toward language at the beginning of our program, I favor the same orientation for outcome statements. It is curious that the reputation of institutional

excellence has traditionally been based on the characteristics of entering students and not on what the institution itself contributes to their learning. The current public debate clearly targets this state of affairs for its criticism of academia. Foreign language programs have an unusual opportunity here to be in the forefront since, overall, work in outcome statements is probably further along for us than for most other disciplines. Just what shape this taking stock will assume should rightfully be up to the institution, despite the public clamor. But there must be such stocktaking. It could begin with something as unexposed to the public eye as functionally oriented curriculum guides and syllabi and span all the way to suggested or perhaps mandatory, highly visible exit requirements that might even be documented in university catalogs and transcripts. These requirements could be in language ability in writing, reading, speaking, and listening; in subject-matter knowledge; or in efforts toward describing how the students' experiences of the subject matter enhanced important developments in their abstract logical thinking and critical analysis, historical consciousness, values, art, and international and multicultural experiences.

I am aware that many of the aspects mentioned require time and a tremendous amount of cooperative effort within foreign language departments, between departments and the university as a whole, and, particularly, between foreign language professionals at all levels of instruction, including researchers in language acquisition and pedagogy. The challenge is out there. I am hopeful that those departments that can muster some of the energy required in working toward solutions will see their majors' programs thrive, even in what admittedly is the generally unsupportive environment for language study and the often uninformed public view of what languages are all about.



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