

Changing Perspectives in Foreign Language Education: Where Do We Come from? Where Are We Going?

Renate A. Schulz
University of Arizona

Abstract: *New beginnings, such as the start of a new century — not to mention a new millennium — lead to reflection on our professional past and possible future. This article reminisces about the “good old days” in foreign language education and assesses changes that have taken place in language teaching since the 1960s. Using questions posed originally by Brecht (2001) regarding the future of foreign language education in the United States, the author offers her own perspectives and adds additional questions and issues the profession will have to deal with successfully to guarantee a valued place for foreign languages in our schools and postsecondary institutions.*

The Good Old Days, Briefly Revisited

As a *femme d'un certain âge*, I should have some credibility in recounting how life as a foreign language teacher was different in the good old days.¹ In those good old days — which ended sometime around 1970 — we had content-based instruction in the best sense of the word, the content being the language as such, that is, the phonetic and grammatical structures of the language we were teaching and how those compared with the sounds and patterns of English. We also touched on cultural patterns, particularly as they were reflected in the accepted literary canon of the time. We conjugated and declined; we transformed singular forms to plurals and present tenses to the past. We greatly preferred our students to be among those with high academic aptitude rather than the academically and motivationally challenged riff raff that would rather enroll in fly and bait casting than German.

Multiple intelligences, learning styles, and learning strategies were not yet topics under consideration. Diversity was considered an obstacle rather than an opportunity. Heritage learners were not an issue. The few who would land in our courses 30 or 40 years ago were seen as a nuisance or — for teachers with limited language proficiency — as a possible threat. Students with a home language other than English either had to adjust to audiolingual elementary language instruction or like my daughter — a heritage speaker of German — they were soon enough motivated to depart for other subjects rather than try to maintain or improve their mother tongue competence in the foreign language classroom.

Back in the good old days, we did not need to deal with “Standards” and we were not bothered by performance assessments. Portfolios were for investors or artists. A good old dictation or transformation exercise did just fine as an indicator of what our students had learned! In the 1970s, teachers had to develop reams of performance objectives which, however, ended up in

Renate A. Schulz (PhD, Ohio State University) is Professor of German Studies and a faculty member of the Interdisciplinary PhD Program in Second Language Acquisition and Teaching (SLAT) at the University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona.