

Language Teaching in Literature Departments: Natural Partnership or Shotgun Marriage?

Nicolas Shumway

THE department of Spanish and Portuguese at Yale currently enrolls about 700 students. Of these, some 125 are taking literature and civilization courses; the rest—nearly 600 students—are studying the Spanish language. Since language instruction is the department's greatest pedagogical responsibility, it would seem logical for appointments to be made accordingly. Such, however, is not the case. At present, only one tenure-track faculty member is teaching a language course. All other language sections are staffed and directed by either lecturers on short-term appointments or graduate students. Moreover, with the exception of my appointment, which is half in literature and half in language teaching, all tenured and tenure-track appointments in the department are defined according to literature specialization.

Now, lest anyone expect an essay devoted to Yale-bashing, let me quickly add that this situation differs little from that of most major departments teaching commonly taught modern languages, whether at Yale or elsewhere. Moreover, in many ways Yale's Spanish department is in better shape than most of the others. For example, it is the only large language department at Yale that has a tenured faculty member in charge of the language program. Further, among graduate students in Yale literature programs, ours are the only ones who receive credit for taking a required course in foreign language teaching, and in recent years the senior faculty has shown strong support for the language program. Finally, in this age of fashionable discontent, I have the effrontery to enjoy my job and to like my institution.

And yet the evidence clearly shows that language teaching does not confer the same benefits or offer the same rewards as teaching literature does. Why is this so? Why isn't language teaching placed on an equal basis with teaching in other disciplines and given ade-

quate tenured or tenurable positions to cover the courses? Why does the university assign the status of migrant workers and part-timers to those who carry such an important responsibility? It seems obvious that academic rigor and continuity cannot be maintained in programs that have constantly shifting personnel. Yet rigor and continuity are the first victims of a governance structure that does not give language teachers a more secure place in the academy.

There are several answers to these questions, none completely satisfying and some just plain wrongheaded. For the most part, the wrongheaded ones constitute a branch of demonology that pits the powerless but righteous language pedagogue against an iniquitous army of ignorant administrators, stingy provosts, and arrogant literary scholars who gather in spacious rooms to scoff at our poor pedagogical virtues. Promoters of such devil theories live in perpetual high dudgeon, always railing at the establishment but never managing to change things.

Now I certainly don't want to suggest that the reverse is true, that in fact all administrators are enlightened, that all provosts are openhanded, and that literary scholars are free of arrogance. But I do want to explore briefly a concern that, in my view, explains best our second-class status in academe—the notion that language teaching is really not a discipline like philosophy, biology, or physics. Of course, we have

The author is Associate Professor of Spanish at Yale University. A version of this article appeared in The Governance of Foreign Language Teaching and Learning: Proceedings of a Symposium, Princeton, New Jersey, 9-11 October 1987, ed. Peter C. Patrikis (New Haven: Consortium for Language Teaching and Learning, 1988).

all the apparatus of a discipline: we hold conferences, write books, publish journals, and hold academic appointments of some sort or other, even if they aren't the most prestigious. Yet the suspicion lingers, despite such activity, that we do not qualify as a discipline. In suggesting reasons that we do not, I am going to risk friendships, but I hope to regain them by arguing that the study of literature is itself on tenuous theoretical ground and may therefore be our most natural ally. And finally, I outline some ideas on how this unspoken but natural alliance can improve the governance of foreign language teaching.

The most immediate evidence against our status as a discipline is the embarrassing fact that we don't really have a name. The term *language-teaching methodologist* is much too cumbersome and vague to stand beside terms like *microbiologist*, *philosopher*, and *economist*. But more important, instead of resolving the conceptual problem that undermines our academic status, it draws attention to it. Calling ourselves *methodologists* merely restates the case of our accusers, who hold that we teach a skill and are not concerned with intellectual substance. Philosophy, literature, chemistry, mathematics, or any other of the traditional disciplines can point to their object of study, a corpus of texts or a specific type of natural phenomena.

What, in contrast, do we as language-teaching methodologists study? If we say we study language, then we are linguists. If we say we study the nature of human discourse and persuasion, then we are rhetoricians. If we say we study communication through symbols within a specific cultural context, then we are anthropologists. If we say we study the mental processes by which language is acquired and used as a vehicle of thought, then we are psychologists. If we say we are all of the above, then we are half-educated generalists who cover so much ground that we cover none of it well. In view of this problem, there has been no lack of attempts to give us a new name. Some have suggested *applied linguist*, but that term begs the question "applied to what?" Linguistics could in principle be applied to anything involving language. Moreover, the adjective *applied* would declass any discipline; the opposite of *applied* is *pure*, and who wants to be associated with something impure? Others have suggested even worse terms, the most evocative being *pedalinguist*, which is no less suggestive than *natural approach* or *total physical response*. But I stray from my topic.

Although nomenclature isn't everything, the difficulty in finding an adequate name for ourselves does point to the crucial issue concerning our work: we do not have a field that can easily be claimed as ours and no one else's. For without a broad knowledge of several fields, we cannot perform well as language teachers. How can we claim expertise in language teaching and

learning without, for example, some understanding of linguistics, discourse analysis, cultural contexts of communication, and learning psychology? In some sense, we face a paradox common to all fields oriented toward performance, whether music, theater, writing, or, for that matter, surgery: language teachers must be able to perform a skill illuminated by light from many disciplines, but, at the same time, talent and performance aptitude are essential gifts in a good language teacher, and, like all gifts, these can be enhanced but not really taught. Just as understanding and knowing alone have never produced a good pianist or a good surgeon, our field is replete with linguists, psychologists, and literature experts who cannot teach language. We are therefore caught in a triple bind: first, we are justly accused of borrowing from too many fields to claim any one as exclusively ours; second, we cannot do our job well without being borrowers and usurpers. And third, the best language teachers are performers; of course, their performance can be perfected through study and practice, but ultimately the best teachers must have the talent for it—just like musicians and neurosurgeons.

This being our predicament, we have several alternatives. The one most often taken—and in my view the one least promising—is to continue insisting that ours is a discipline like any other. This is not a good alternative, because, no matter how shrilly it has been proclaimed, it has not gained us a more secure place in the academy; we are still, for the most part, the poor relations of literature departments, welcome at the back door and necessary in the kitchen but never allowed in the front rooms, where the children of privilege receive party favors like tenure, sabbatical leaves, and voting rights. Another alternative has been to marry language teaching to other departments, those of linguistics and education being the most frequent partners. But these arrangements have not, as far as I can tell, resolved the problems mentioned earlier; rather, they have merely rearranged the configuration of subordination and suspicion. Moreover, even when education and linguistics departments accept the additional responsibility of language teaching, they still rely on graduate students, mostly in literature, for teaching, just as literature departments still need language teaching to support their graduate students. Furthermore, from a financial point of view, moving foreign language teaching from one department to another does not make it cheaper; as a result, most of the actual teaching of language remains in the hands of lecturers, preceptors, teaching assistants, and the like, regardless of who is in charge. And finally, removing language teaching from literature departments is an option available only in a few universities; at Yale and at most similar institutions, there is simply no better place for language instruction. Whether by shotgun

wedding or not, the union of foreign literature study and language teaching is a structural fact that is not likely to change. I would therefore suggest that, instead of exorcising uncertain demons, we should try to enhance a de facto relationship that is not going to vanish. Toward this end, I outline two propositions, one conceptual and one practical.

First the conceptual argument. As I stated earlier, we are justly accused of borrowing from other disciplines to such a degree that we cannot really claim any discipline as exclusively our own. But the more interesting question is not whether we borrow but whether our borrowing is legitimate. If, for example, it can be demonstrated that our borrowings from linguistics, psychology, literature, anthropology, or whatever extend legitimate branches of those fields, then it follows that those fields are not complete unless they take into account language teaching and learning.

Curiously enough, the study of literature is theoretically in much the same condition—but for quite different reasons. Whereas language teaching is accused of being heavy on methods while having no real object of study, the study of literature is accused of having an authentic corpus but no proven methods for studying and defining it. Indeed, literary critics borrow from other disciplines just as shamelessly as language teachers do; history, philosophy, psychology, discourse analysis, linguistics, anthropology, and the like play such a dominant role in literary analysis that students of literature are just as obsessed as any language pedagogue with the search for a discipline that is exclusively literary in some sense. That search has yielded much dense prose and many tenured appointments, but it has not resolved the debate. If you don't believe me, ask the most distinguished literary critic you know for a usable definition of literature and literary criticism. The most common response is tautological: literary criticism is what literary critics do; in short, literary criticism is ultimately defined as performance rather than substance—just like language teaching. Moreover, when we realize that the study of literature borrows from most of the same disciplines that we do, it becomes clear that ours is conceptually not such a different enterprise. We share a common list of creditors, whether it includes psychology, linguistics, cultural analysis, semiotics, or discourse analysis. It is also true that literature scholars have no good term for themselves; just as *methodologist* calls attention to our conceptual vulnerability, the term *critic* evokes theirs, suggesting that they are parasites on literary creativity and therefore essential to no one but themselves. Similarly, the search for an alternative to *critic* has produced many uneasy terms: *literary theorist*, *literary historian*, *semiotician*, and even—that *monstrum Yalensis*—*deconstructionist*. In view of our common de-

pendency and insecurity, it is, perhaps, entirely fitting, poetically just if you will, that literature and language teaching are almost always housed in the same department. We deserve each other. We need each other. And on parting we both might die.

And this brings me to the practical dimension of governance within existing structures that I promised you earlier. The practical question, in my view, is not how to make language teaching independent of literature departments but how to produce literature PhDs who are informed about and sympathetic with language teaching. And, to make my point, I return to where I started, the Spanish department at Yale.

When I arrived at Yale ten years ago, teacher training for graduate students in the Spanish department was all but nonexistent. The person I replaced, a man of much goodwill but little training in language teaching, had managed to procure funds for videotaping interested TAs. But nothing was being done systematically; for the most part, untrained TAs were teaching less trained TAs what neither knew. With the considerable support of the senior faculty, I was able to create a teacher-training course for graduate students; it is required of all who want to teach in our department, and it carries graduate credit. The course includes some theoretical information on comparative methods, phonetics, and advanced grammar, but it is primarily conceived as a practicum that includes practice teaching and an extensive apprenticeship program. For the practice teaching, I have received a budget to pay Yale students in beginning Spanish to participate in a laboratory class, where they are taught by trainees under my direction; at the same time, each trainee is apprenticed to an experienced teacher in a regular beginning Spanish section, in a program not unlike that used in the normal schools of yesteryear. Trainees teach with, and occasionally for, their trainer teacher throughout the semester and teach at least once under my observation. As a result of this program, all Yale PhDs in Hispanic literature are conversant with language-teaching methods and usually have three to four years of teaching experience before they enter the job market. With few exceptions, they are also sympathetic to the demands of a language program and, in my view, will be much better informed administrators and colleagues than their predecessors were. In short, we feel that no PhD should leave our department without a firm grounding in both literature and language teaching. Since our responsibilities include both, we do both.

But how about the other half of the problem? A training program will certainly give rigor to language instruction, but such rigor can vanish overnight if there is not some continuity in the supervision of the language program. To provide such continuity, the university recently approved a new kind of tenured

position for someone with acceptable credentials in both literature and language. The argument was quite simply that a department that teaches both should have at least one tenured faculty member teaching both. Once the case was made for this dual position and an acceptable person was found, the appointment was approved with virtually no opposition. A similarly mixed position in literature and writing has now been created and filled in the English department, and a faculty committee has recommended to the administration that similar mixed positions be created in all large language departments.

Now, obviously, Nirvana has not been achieved on the shore of the Long Island Sound. We all know that much remains to be done. But I think it fair to say that the governance of some language instruction at Yale

is on much sounder footing now than before. This is so because, instead of dissolving the marriage of language teaching and literature, we have accepted that union, whether natural or shotgun, as a fact of the profession; in short, whatever progress in governance has been made at Yale resulted from asking for the possible rather than the ideal. Ours is obviously not the only solution for a difficult problem; moreover, it is clearly not a solution for language programs teaching Chinese, Arabic, or other less commonly taught languages, where governance structures are entirely different. Nor is it perhaps a good solution for large departments that can allow for greater specialization among senior faculty members. It is, however, a model that I recommend for departments facing problems similar to ours.

Join today

The American Classical League

The Classical Outlook and Membership: \$25-

Membership in ACL includes

The Classical Outlook and ACL Newsletter

Teaching Materials and Resource Center

National Junior Classical League

Elementary Teachers of Classics and Prima

Latin and Greek Teacher Placement Service

National Latin and Greek Exams

Teacher and Student Scholarships

ACL Annual Institute and Workshops

Name _____

Send dues to:

Address _____

The American Classical League

School _____

Miami University

Oxford, Ohio 45056

Amount enclosed: _____

Your membership in ACL helps support the classics
at all levels of education.

Canadian and foreign members: \$27.00 U.S. by International Money Order