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Remembering Ourselves as Second Language Readers-in-Training

Imagine the first meeting of a graduate-level methods course, Teaching Literature to the Undergraduate Foreign Language Major. The students, who eagerly aspire to enter academia after they receive their degrees, have just found seats in the classroom. Before we look at the course syllabus, though, I hand out sheets of paper with the following ice-breaker activity:

Think back to your high school and college days . . . to your literature courses. Try to recall some experiences you had reading in your first language. Were you bored by Moby-Dick? Mesmerized by Cry, the Beloved Country? Or simply bewildered by whatever masterpieces of your national literature were assigned to be read, some so far removed from your own world?

Now think of your experiences as you first encountered literature—long pieces, full-length novels or plays, not just poems or short stories—in your second (or third, or fourth) language. What comes to mind? Joy? Pain? The thrill of victory? The agony of defeat? Or perhaps just utter confusion?

Jot down what you recall about your experiences reading literature in your first and second languages, and prepare to share some of them with your classmates in small groups.

Now, try to envision the discussion that ensues. What experiences would you recount?

With a laugh, I look back on the first phase of my own second language literary experiences as my bulas papales (papal bulls) stage. When I first encountered the word bulas, it was in part 5 of the classic Spanish picaresque novel Lazarillo de Tormes, and I was a high school senior in Iowa. I immediately realized from the context that bulas were something that the rogue Lázaro and his latest master, the buldero, a “bula seller,” were going to hawk—and in doing so, make a handsome profit tricking gullible villagers. Obviously, deciphering this new word was the key to understanding the episode. So I did what any student in Spanish class would do—I looked up the word in the glossary at the back of the book. Bulas was defined as “papal bulls.” Papal bulls? To this good Protestant girl who spent vacations on her grandparents’ farm and was an eight-year member of 4-H (albeit in an urban club), those famous bulas (papal bulls) of Lazarillo de Tormes just had to be livestock. Evidently, I surmised, there were two words for male individuals of the bovine species in Spanish—toro, the familiar word probably used for secular bulls, like the one my grandparents owned, and bula, for whatever sacred bulls the pope might have on his vast land holdings. Had Lazarillo’s anonymous author just used a cognate like indulgencias (indulgences) instead of bulas, I would have understood the passage, as I was well versed, from years of Sunday school, in the abuses engendered by the pre-Reformation practice of selling indulgences. Furthermore, I would have avoided the confusion caused by the incongruity of sermons being preached at what appeared to me to be a cattle auction to be conducted by the buldero. (But, of course, who knew what the normative practices were in very Catholic sixteenth-century Spain—maybe cattle sales were preceded by some kind of blessing of the beasts?) I might have actually understood the real goings-on of that segment of the story the first time around. Thankfully, however, I was saved from public embarrassment in class when someone else was called on to explain the plot line of this episode; I doubt that even my teacher...

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noted me blush as I painfully realized the enormity of my misinterpretation.

Why would I start out a course this way, with a trip down memory road? My answer, in short: Graduate programs in literature do an extraordinary job of training their students in literary theory and critical analysis of canonical and noncanonical works appropriate to their fields. Yet, armed with a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of deconstruction, Derrida, feminist theory, Foucault, Lacan, new historicism, reader-response theory, semiotics, and so on and an intense devotion to and love of interpretation of literature (especially those works that form the basis for their dissertations!), new PhDs often get a few surprises as they seek to translate their knowledge and finely honed skills into effective teaching in the undergraduate foreign language classroom. Remembering that we were all once what I call readers-in-training and reliving some of our personal struggles just to understand, much less interpret, a work of literature help to keep us grounded in reality.

Each time I recall the bulas incident and the faulty strategies I used in deriving meaning from Lazarillo de Tormes—a too-literal interpretation of a dictionary meaning combined with the innocent misapplication of a twentieth-century Iowa context to a small town in sixteenth-century Spain—I realize that my advanced-level undergraduate students face many of the same challenges reading literature in Spanish that I did years ago. As I was back then, they are still both “learning to read” and “reading to learn,” to use Renate Schulz’s words (43). With this realization in mind, we should ask ourselves, How can we best train our future colleagues to reconcile top-down course design and teaching (starting from literary theory, analytical and critical thinking goals, and compelling works of literature) with bottom-up sensitivity to the special circumstances and opportunities that teaching literature to undergraduate foreign language majors presents?

In an ideal world, the exploration of how to teach literature and the concomitant preparation of graduate students to be reflective teachers would be integrated into graduate programs in a systematic fashion based on collaborative work by faculty members in literature and second language acquisition (see Scott and Tucker). Various possible models emerge, from high-quality, one-on-one mentoring, team-teaching, and institutionalized pre- or postdoctoral internships for graduate students or recent PhDs (see ideas proposed by Debicki and by Ogden, for instance) to carefully structured graduate programs in which methods of teaching literature to undergraduate majors is part of the content of literature courses themselves (Pfeiffer). Furthermore, if doctoral students received their graduate training in departments whose undergraduate curriculum simultaneously facilitated advanced-level language acquisition, second language literacy, and literary competence in a coordinated fashion, there would be no need for freestanding methods of teaching literature courses for graduate students, as Peter C. Pfeiffer makes clear. Until comprehensive preprofessional training becomes the standard for the profession, however, the development of methods courses devoted to the teaching of literature is one concrete step that could help future PhDs transcend the graduate school models presented implicitly as norms to be replicated elsewhere and assist doctoral students in learning to contextualize their teaching in the undergraduate classroom (see Bernhardt, esp. 200–07).

In this proposal outlining a framework for a course in teaching literature to the undergraduate foreign language major, the key, in my view, is to start not with literary theory, as standard graduate school training might lead one to believe is the appropriate point of departure, but with the readers in our classes. These readers, our undergraduate foreign language majors, range from students who have just crossed the border between the end of the foreign language requirement (usually an intermediate-level language class) and the beginning of the major (typically, an advanced grammar or a composition and conversation class) to those who have just spent a semester or year abroad. Often the entire range of students is present in a single class. Regardless of their level of experience, though, these students have three aspects in common, which I will use to inform the framework for a methods of teaching literature course: our students as language majors, our students as language learners, and our students as “nonintended” readers of literary texts in the foreign language (see Kern 114–15; Kramsch 357; Essif 32).

Our Students as Language Majors

Except for instructors at research institutions, where the size of the faculty and the organization of the department permit undergraduate foreign language majors to follow one of several tracks (e.g., language and linguistics, culture, or literature), most of us teach at institutions where undergraduates are simply French or Spanish or Russian majors. In other words, they are primarily language majors, not literature or comparative literature or literary theory majors. Even in institutions large enough to offer a multitrack major, however, the undergraduate curriculum should not necessarily be a miniature version of a graduate literature program whose goal is to train students to reach a designated level of expertise in literary theory and analysis. Instead, the curriculum should be a means of helping our students develop their foreign language in the broadest sense of the word. In this regard, it behooves us to keep in mind Patricia Chaput’s statement that “there is no such thing as ‘just language’”—as some of our students are wont to think. The continuation of this quotation further clarifies what I agree needs to be at the heart of the undergraduate language major: “Language as used by educated speakers is inseparable
from their cultural and historical experience, so that to understand language is to understand the significance of events and texts and of the associations with them that speakers retain today" (33). Chaput's emphasis on understanding texts and their importance within language communities dovetails with Janet Swaffar's characterization of foreign language as a discipline: "The goal of our discipline is to enable students to recognize the various intentionalities behind verbal and written texts and to use language effectively to achieve their own purposes within a cultural community." Swaffar exhorts us to engage students in dealing with "the fundamental question of how individuals and groups use words in contexts to intend, negotiate, and create meanings" (157).

Both of these conceptualizations link language proficiency to the ability to function in a community that interacts not only in contexts determined by the immediacy of real-time, face-to-face transactions but in those that grow out of shared textual and intertextual experiences over time. Thus, using such a conceptualization of the foreign language major as my point of departure, I would begin the methods of teaching literature course with the following philosophical questions meant to provoke analysis of the contexts in which graduate students have been educated and socialized:

1. (Directed to graduate students in the class as individuals) What are your assumptions about the value of reading literature in another language as an independent activity in itself and as part of the undergraduate foreign language major? What has informed these assumptions?

2. (Directed to graduate students in the class as members of an institutional community) How does your institution or department define the undergraduate foreign language major? Is the major clearly outlined or is it defined by default (i.e., does the graduate school literature model implicitly fill a void not made explicit locally)? In other words, what are the foundational texts (e.g., catalog copy, brochures, Web site information) and Texts (the often unspoken assumptions that underlie departmental practices) of your department, and how do they envision the undergraduate major and, more specifically, the role of literature within the major? What is the relation between stated and unstated beliefs and actual practices? (In this regard, see Bernhardt 200.)

3. (Directed to graduate students as members of a professional community broader than their institutional context) After you have examined sample documents from other colleges and universities, how would you say the following institutions define the undergraduate major: other research institutions, liberal arts colleges, and community colleges? Do these definitions seem to fit the nature of the institutions? How do they differ from those espoused by your department or institution?

4. (Again, directed to graduate students as members of a professional community broader than their institutional context) What has been the role of literature within the undergraduate foreign language major in the United States across time? How has it changed over the past one hundred years? What concepts, notions, theories, and events have given rise to the current views of literature with regard to the undergraduate foreign language major? Base your response on analyses of the way literature has been viewed from the perspective of foreign language teaching (see Kramsch and Kramsch) and the creation of literary studies as an academic field (see Graff, esp. chs. 1, 5, 14, 15). How does an understanding of the history of teaching literature in a foreign language help you understand your high school, college, and graduate school experiences?

Our discussions of these questions would enable us, throughout the course, to problematize the role of literature at each stage of the major, from the ubiquitous survey course to the senior seminar, including courses in culture and civilization, composition and conversation, advanced language, and language for special purposes.

These philosophical questions would also serve as a backdrop to a concrete look at real students and their characteristics in the methods course. We would start with recent research on undergraduate foreign language students at the intermediate level—a particularly appropriate and revealing place to begin, because intermediate-level students are the premajors, those who will either end their language study once they fulfill their foreign language requirement (the vast majority) or test the waters of the major in transition courses: advanced grammar, composition and conversation, and so forth (the minority). Examining the intermediate-level students and their experiences with and ideas about reading literature would help us understand the background of our beginning majors.

Several pertinent research studies carried out in the United States and Australia provide valuable insights into the mind-set of students on the verge of the major. In a comprehensive 1981 study of French and Italian students throughout Australia, Daniel Hawley concluded that students’ overall evaluations of foreign language courses were directly related to their perceptions of how their ability to speak the language had progressed (qtd. in Martin and Laurie 189). Almost twenty years later, in 1997, Ali Alalou surveyed the perceived needs and preferences of beginning and intermediate French, German, and Spanish students in the United States against the backdrop of the stated departmental missions of their colleges; Alalou also found that the students placed a priority on developing their speaking ability. When students were asked to rank courses they would be interested in taking if they became majors, the majority responded resounding that conversation courses were the most important option (457–59). Anne L. Martin and Ian Laurie surveyed intermediate French students at an Australian university, specifically to test the hypothesis that students undervalue literature because they do not think it contributes to their goal of oral proficiency (189). The results from this study suggest
how our own premajors or beginning majors may approach literature. While the study corroborated the researchers’ hypothesis, even the literature-shy students acknowledged that literature might contribute to the development of their language skills, including their speaking skills (199). Even more illuminating, Martin and Laurie discovered that those students they referred to as “anti-literature” did not dislike literature but were actually avid leisure-time readers. Still, these students were skeptical about the value of literature in language skill development and felt incompetent to read literature in a foreign language because of insufficient linguistic and cultural preparation. In some cases, their feelings of inadequacy reflected “bad memories” of high school English courses (201).

Most important for graduate students preparing to teach literature to undergraduates, however, is Martin and Laurie’s characterization of the way intermediate-level students approach reading literature, as illustrated in the two quotations that follow. The first quotation highlights how students, influenced by the organization of language instruction in textbooks, perceive reading literature through the lens of practicing language skills:

Students at this level attack their reading with a language learning mindset still in place. They are looking for particular applications of literature, all of which tend to reflect the content of introductory language textbooks rather than the aims of literary theory or analysis: vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, examples of grammar in use, dialogues, a chance, even, to practice pronunciation by reading aloud. (202)

The second quotation points to the beginning of a shift in students’ perceptions that provides an opportunity for language learning to develop in a more holistic fashion than usually happens in the first- or second-year class:

[The students] were still approaching literature with . . . a belief that language develops primarily in direct correlation to the skill most clearly exercised. They viewed foreign language reading initially as a series of essentially discrete linguistic exercises aimed at extending their language skills. By midway through their intermediate course, however, they were beginning to show signs of wanting to pull these together into more global comprehension strategies. . . . (204)

To delve deeper into the relation between learners’, teachers’, and institutional views of the value of reading literature, I would ask the students in the methods course to analyze the two quotations and reflect on the following questions:

1. Do you find anything surprising in these characterizations of intermediate-level language students?
2. Do any of your own students approach reading with a language learning mind-set? What evidence of this phenomenon have you seen? What impact do such students have on class dynamics? Do you have any intermediate-level students who have progressed beyond this mind-set? What seems to have influenced them?
3. After you examine Martin and Laurie’s study, what gaps can you envision between the way intermediate-level students might approach literature and the way you as a teacher plan to teach literature? To what extent would you modify your class plans to take such gaps into consideration?
4. Which, if any, of the views described in the quotations do you think might persist in students’ minds well into the language major? Why? What experiences, in class or out of class, might help students progress beyond a language learning mind-set toward reading literature?

Our Students as Language Learners

Findings from research on students in a language sequence, such as the results cited above, should remind us that, like their intermediate-level counterparts, our foreign language majors are still language learners. Both research and our practical experience indicate that language acquisition does not stop at the end of the foreign language requirement. Nonetheless, in our commitment to teaching content in literature courses, we may be tempted to include too many texts and too much literary theory in major-level courses, creating syllabi better suited to graduate seminars than to students acquiring advanced-level language proficiency. Thus, the second issue that would ground our work in the methods course is the fact that our students are still readers-in-training—linguistically, culturally, and conceptually.

We would consider carefully the impact of our students as language learners on the very process of reading. Current literary theories espouse the notion that meaning is not contained exclusively in a text but rather is produced through the interactions between the reader and the text. Yet, this idea, which underlies our scholarly analyses of literary texts, may not be applied with equal rigor to the undergraduate foreign language classroom, where the only reader interacting directly with the text in a significant fashion may be the teacher. The irony of this situation becomes apparent when we read Elizabeth Bernhardt’s description of graduate students vis-à-vis teaching literature: “Most students believe that teaching is about them and the literary text; in other words, the text-preservation agenda seems to be foremost for graduate students and . . . undergraduate students just sort of happen to be there” (200). Such a traditional text- and teacher-centric mode of instruction is frequently reinforced by the behavior of the students, who are comfortable in their role as consumers of received knowledge. As Richard Kern asserts, “For many foreign language students, the de facto goal of reading is uncovering the meaning, the theme, the point of a text (i.e. what the teacher reveals in class)” (23).
If we keep in mind, however, that student readers interacting with the text should be at the center of the undergraduate literature classroom—not the text and not the teacher—two logical pedagogical consequences result. The first of these underscores a new position for the text itself. Kern, in a discussion of literacy and academic language teaching, recommends a shift from “what texts mean” in some absolute sense, to what people mean by texts, and what texts mean to people who belong to different discourse communities” (2). With these words, he captures the essence of Chaput’s and Swaffar’s previously cited concepts of foreign language as a major and as a discipline and thus provides an organizing principle for undergraduate literature courses.

The second pedagogical consequence highlights the notion of interaction with a text—not the instructor’s interaction as a professional reader but students’ interactions with it. Moreover, it suggests the need to enhance students’ engagement with texts through systematic participation in speaking and writing tasks that make them active processors of the text, not passive consumers of the meanings we as teachers have constructed through our own interactions with the text. If we encourage our students to use active learning strategies, we will both foster their language development and assist them in becoming insightful readers and creators of meaning.

With this in mind, we would explore concrete ways to facilitate students’ interactions with texts—and with each other—in the methods course. A useful starting point is William Grabe’s work on the interaction of reading and writing. Grabe speaks of the relation between second language reading and writing in terms of five notions: “reading to learn, writing to learn, reading to improve writing, writing to improve reading, and reading and writing together for better learning” (15). If we modify this series of relations to focus on reading literature in an interactive fashion—creating meaning from a text, in a process that is mediated by both speaking and writing—the following expanded scheme emerges:

- reading literature to learn content (linguistic, sociocultural, and literary) and use language
- speaking and writing to learn content and use language
- reading literature to improve speaking and writing
- speaking and writing as a means through which readers create meaning while interacting with a literary text
- reading literature, speaking, and writing together, for better learning throughout the major

This scheme can help us forge links between reading literature and promoting students’ interactions with texts through speaking and writing. For example, we might begin by examining the limitations of the lecture format as the traditional modus operandi of the literature classroom and the advantages of adopting a student-centered atmosphere. What classroom speaking activities would encourage our readers-in-training to wrestle with texts directly? Informal, but structured, small- and large-group discussions; scripted dramatizations; formal panel discussions and round-table presentations are just a few. Next, we could look at the expansion of writing beyond the standard end-of-course term paper (too often just a recasting of the instructor’s interpretations of the text, with a few quotations as embellishments). Instead, we can consider other types of writing, such as short summaries of the text, in which the students use, in context, as many words learned in the day’s reading assignment as possible; informal writing assignments that support reading by highlighting one success and one difficulty presented by the day’s assignment—an activity that can, in turn, be the springboard for the day’s in-class discussion; commentaries on class discussions or on classmates’ presentations, with an emphasis on the contributions of such work to a student’s understanding of the text; written reviews of the literary text, created with publication in mind—whether in the book section of an actual target language newspaper or in the local electronic version, to be circulated among class members; transformation of part of a text into another literary genre or type of discourse (e.g., historical or journalistic), to see how language and meaning interact in different contexts; and analytical commentaries on aspects of the text. We would discuss how these and other speaking and writing activities—from those that focus on plot or characterization to ones that analyze more-abstract elements of meaning—can be incorporated into the course. Finally, we would examine which types of speaking and writing activities might constitute, in Bernhardt’s terminology, the “culminating task,” in which learners organize their discoveries in an integrative fashion as a substitute for the traditional term paper (205).

In bringing students face to face with the text and with each other, appropriate speaking and writing activities encourage them to learn content and provide an arena for sustained, intentional language learning and use. Examining such activities in the methods course returns us to a discussion of the role of the instructor in the interactive process. If, as Bernhardt suggests, teaching is not about the literary text or the teacher, what is the instructor’s place in the undergraduate literature classroom? If instructors are no longer the expert interpreters who pass down polished analyses in lectures, neither do they take a hands-off approach. Indeed, designing speaking and writing activities that lead, guide, or nudge students to process texts and construct meanings takes much more time and energy than preparing lectures. The following two descriptions of teaching that facilitates student interactions with literary texts might further stimulate our discussion in the methods course. In the first one, James Davis speaks of the teacher as a “mediating reader” who uses methods that encourage students to produce their own meanings. Instead of giving the “correct” interpretation, the
teacher fosters the linking of the students' own experiences with the information in the text. Integrating reading into the foreign language curriculum entails multiple dialogues: between reader and text, between teaching-mediated reader and not-yet-competent reader and among student readers. (426)

The second is Les Essif's eloquent statement that “in teaching, it is more productive to transform than to inform, to construct than to instruct, to create an awareness of context than to teach the rules of the text” (32).

As before, I would use these quotations to challenge the prevailing views and practices of our profession through questions to the graduate students enrolled in the course:

1. Have you seen the kind of teaching described by Davis or Essif in action? in what context? How did classroom activities reflect the instructor's concept of his or her role as “mediating reader” or as transformer rather than informer?
2. Is the teacher as “mediating reader” or transformer the model prevalent in your experience? Is it the dominant model in undergraduate courses at your institution? Why or why not?
3. How do the statements by Davis and by Essif relate to (reflect, parallel, question, contradict, or subvert) your own concepts of how to teach literature? Would you feel comfortable taking on the roles they describe? Why or why not?

Our Students as Nonintended Readers

The last of the three major issues on which I would base this methods course is the nature of our students as nonintended readers of foreign language literary texts. Nonintended does not mean “incompetent” or “unproductive.” I use the term to refer to readers who have trouble filling in the gaps in a text because they are not the ones whom the author envisioned to be part of his or her audience. This notion forces us to take seriously research findings that, in reading a foreign language, we build on the conceptual background and knowledge base of our first language. Thus, the cultural, socioeconomic, and historical facts that students learn about their own and the target community, as well as their knowledge of literature and literary concepts from high school or previous college literature classes, come into play as they read a foreign language text (Bernhardt 198; Fecteau 479, 489), just as they did when I read Lazarillo de Tormes so many years ago. From this perspective, the gaps that our students face as nonintended readers may not be only or primarily linguistic or literary but also conceptual and cultural. Keeping in mind that our undergraduate students are nonintended readers opens up exciting intellectual possibilities. Instead of thinking of them as nonnatives ill equipped for the task, we should see them as poised to learn from the productive dialogues that can occur when their responses to the text come in contact with native-reader interpretations. As Kern posits, foreign language reading should not necessarily privilege “normative 'in-group' interpretations” (as if all native speakers interpreted what they read in a homogenous, univocal manner) (114–15). Similarly, he reminds us that even nonintended readers must be responsible readers, basing their interpretations on facets of the text (115–16). In the interactive classroom—in which students are encouraged to encounter texts as coproducers of meaning—the risk, of course, is that students' interpretations will be based on personal anecdotes or random musings about topics perhaps tangentially connected to the text and lead to an undisciplined cycle of highly idiosyncratic ruminations. To create a positive space for the nonintended reader and to mitigate the effects of runaway discussions, Kern suggests that foreign language readers be taught to develop, from their position as cultural outsiders, with unique insights that may come from cultural distance, the ability to mediate between their own and native-reader interpretations. In this way, as students learn to read interculturally, they would take important steps toward entering the cultural imagination of another society (130, 305–14).

With both the limitations and the potential of the nonintended reader in mind, we would analyze the types and the extent of the linguistic, conceptual, and cultural background that undergraduate majors might need. To do so, we would look at specific literary texts and students' backgrounds against the backdrop of concrete course goals and learning tasks. Our starting point, again, would not normally be the theoretical orientation underlying graduate literary research but, rather, the knowledge that undergraduate readers-in-training must possess to be prepared for the role(s) that an author invites them to play in interacting with the text, to paraphrase Kramsch (357).

A look at how I prepare my Spanish Culture and Civilization students (fifth-semester Spanish) to step into the role of the reader that Miguel Delibes's El tesoro (1985) asks them to play might be the first activity in the methods course. Before students read this novel, which dramatizes conflicts between urban and rural Spain when an archaeological treasure is unearthed in a farmer's field in the early 1980s, we try to get a feel for what life is like in big cities and small cities in present-day Spain. On the first day of class, students describe and comment on a series of about thirty color photographs of urban and rural scenes from throughout Spain, as a visual introduction to the diversity of the country. Students invariably make comparisons between what they see in the photographs and their own experiences in different parts of the United States. Moreover, the views of rural life in the United States expressed by the urban and suburban students (always the majority) are vigorously challenged by classmates from rural areas. In this way, students' in-class interactions become a sort of preview of the misconceptions
that can arise when urban and rural people come into contact. Next, we read and discuss an essay written at a level appropriate for high school students, on the twentieth-century rural exodus in Spain (Martín Vide) and articles from the popular press on the pros and cons of urban life in Spain and the challenges faced by people who stay on in small towns despite the lure of the city. We then move from the characteristics of contemporary urban and rural life in Spain to profiles of six cities and towns, ranging from Girona, ranked the most livable city in Spain in the 1990s (Gómez), to villages struggling for survival, to towns like Tenerúel, whose citizens are demanding attention from the government and their fellow Spaniards (see Rodríguez). These articles create rich visual images of people and places. By the time students start reading the novel, they have a storehouse of vocabulary, images, and ideas of what can happen when rural folk and city dwellers collide. At the same time, the novel creates enough suspense to keep the readers engaged.

In a similar fashion, in the course From the Civil War to the Democratic Transition: History and Story in Spanish Narrative, we begin by viewing a documentary on the Spanish Civil War for background information on the controversies leading up to the war and on the war itself (1936 to 1939). Through this activity, students get an overview of 1930s Spain and a visual context for what they will later read. After this, we read primary documents from the 1930s (excerpts from the Constitution of 1931, regional statutes of autonomy, political speeches by factions on the right and the left, pastoral letters, radio communiqués, and so on) to familiarize ourselves with the rhetoric and ideology of the Republican Loyalists and the Francoist rebels. From primary documents we move on to lengthy excerpts from two history books: one, published during the Franco years, that I read as a student in a history class at the Complutense University of Madrid in 1975–76 (Pérez-Bustamante); and the other, a standard high school textbook published in the 1980s, in fully democratic Spain (Prats et al.). These two contrasting versions of the events of 1930s Spain illustrate succinctly how even historical accounts are constructed through manipulation of language. All these activities, then, are the prelude to reading the novels included in the course. As in the previous example, students become familiar with the rhetoric and political and socioeconomic discourses of the period and analyze nonfiction versions of the real-world events that form the backdrop for the literature they will read during the rest of the semester.

Both of these examples can serve as object lessons for the graduate students as well as a point of departure for their reflections on how to situate texts linguistically, culturally, and cognitively with regard to the readers in their current or future classrooms. At the same time, the examples might suggest the possible negative effects of providing excess background information. Kern wisely warns of the danger of undermining students’ motivation to read by making a topic too familiar: “we rarely bother to read texts that tell us what we already know” (98). A fitting debate in the methods course would be on how to negotiate a middle road that “sequence[s] [students’] intellectual risk,” to use Anita Vogely’s words (244), and moves them toward what Kern recommends as an ultimate goal: “[deriving] background knowledge the same way native speakers do—through extensive experience dealing with spoken and written texts” (58).

This final quotation from Kern leads us, yet again, to the statements by Chaput and Swaffar earlier in this article. Understanding a foreign language involves understanding, in context, the oral and written texts and Texts that a community creates and shares. Reading literature is an essential component of this process. Extensive reading of literature along with other texts both promotes intellectual comprehension of the target community and facilitates entry into it.

The framework I have proposed, for a course in the methods of teaching literature to the undergraduate foreign language major, builds on the realities of the undergraduate reader-in-training in the United States. It grows out of recent research in second language acquisition, literary theory, concerns voiced publicly by members of the profession, and my own insights from years of reading literature with undergraduate students of Spanish, almost all at liberal arts colleges. It is my modest desire that it will suggest ways in which theory and application can intersect usefully in the classroom. Far from a finished product, it is but one possibility out of a myriad of potential course configurations. I offer it for further discussion and debate in the hope that faculty members at research universities preparing PhDs will help our future colleagues complete their professionalization by training to be effective teachers of literature to undergraduates, as well as innovative and productive literary scholars.

Notes

A very special note of appreciation is due Karthe Goldstein, an exemplary teacher, whose love of Spanish literature (Lazarillo de Tormes included!) and ability to motivate students to aspire to excellence planted the seeds in an Iowa classroom some thirty years ago that ultimately produced this article.

1An exemplary model of such an undergraduate curriculum is Georgetown University's undergraduate German program, developed jointly by faculty members and graduate students. For a discussion of issues underlying the development of such an integrated curriculum, see Byrnes and Kord.

2The study cited by Martin and Laurie is Daniel S. Hawley, Survey of Students Enrolled in Italian and French Courses in Tertiary Institutions: A Report Funded by the Education Research and Development Committee, University of Wollongong, New South Wales, 1981. It is unclear whether this study has been published.

3The options were conversation, literature, civilization, advanced language, phonetics and pronunciation, advanced grammar, business language, and language for international affairs.
I purposely use say “use” language instead of “practice” language here to emphasize the creation of meaning through language in a communicative context (for example, discussion of the impact of some aspect of the text) rather than the mere manipulation of language forms (as in a retelling of the plot for practice in conjugating past-tense verbs).

For an insightful discussion of the concept of “difficulty” in reading literature in a second language and the way in which the challenge can elucidate the texts, see Salvatori.

Linda Flower's contrast between critical literacy (thinking based on reading and analysis of texts) and critical thinking (thinking independent of reading texts) is a helpful concept. In my experience, students are often enthusiastic about a topic presented in a text—if they can examine and discuss it from their personal perspectives—but perhaps less interested in the same topic if it is presented through the perspective of the text. Redirecting their energies away from their own lives and toward the text can be an ongoing challenge.

Works Cited


Teaching literature to non-language major students for example shall be packed with strategies that will help them to appreciate it. Sophomore students of PUP College of Human Kinetics probably wonder why they have literature courses. Theoretical Framework In supporting a study, we need to find proofs to show that our study is achievable. The study did not involve language majors and other courses in Polytechnic University of the Philippines excluding sophomore BPE. An integrated approach to the use of literature in the language classroom offers foreign language learners the opportunity to develop not only their linguistic and communicative skills but also their knowledge about language in all its discourse types. The Foreign Language Teaching Methodologies That You Should Know. Grammar-translation. Have you ever studied Latin? Language learners use the language that they know to complete a variety of assignments, acquiring new structures, forms and vocabulary as necessary. Little error correction is provided. Reading Method “ Sometimes graduate students or researchers will only need to learn how to read scholarly articles in a language, so they learn through the Reading Method, where enough grammar is taught to make it through a standard article in their field. Students do not work on speaking or listening comprehension; rather, they concentrate on building up a large reservoir of specialized vocabulary. Ideal for methods and foundational courses in world language education, this book presents a theoretically informed instructional framework for instruction and assessment of world languages. In line with ACTFL and CEFR standards, this more. The study shows that, more than following a method, adopting an approach that focuses on interactions as a means of promoting both linguistic improvement and questioning of naturalized assumptions is an effective way to learn and teach a foreign/second language. Teaching of Foreign Languages, Literature And Language Teaching, Methodology and Didactics of Foreign Language Teaching, Modern Foreign Language Teacher Education and Training.