Foreign-Language Departments Bring Everyday Texts to Teaching

By BURTON BOLLAG

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In a second-semester German class at Georgetown University, students each present a favorite omelet recipe. They will soon use German to write postcards to friends and prepare the horoscopes of ideal partners.

Down the hall, students in a fourth-year German class each write a letter to the editor from an imagined old man who compares contemporary xenophobia to what he witnessed in World War II. They also write letters of condolence to the imagined sister of a Jewish woman killed in the Nazi-led pogrom known as Kristallnacht.

For many experts, Georgetown's German department is a model for a new approach that is beginning to transform how foreign languages are taught. Instead of merely learning the language, and later its literature, Georgetown students are steeped, from the beginning, in the culture of the speakers of the language. And that emphasis on culture in turn informs their language education.

Much more than most institutions, Georgetown's program emphasizes the differences in style that each linguistic task calls for. Learn that, the department says, and you can communicate with native German speakers much more knowledgeably than typical graduates of German programs at American institutions.

As other universities consider this major shift to a more-cultural approach to teaching languages, Glenn S. Levine, an associate professor and director of the German-language program at the University of California at Irvine, says Georgetown's German program "showed it could be done."

In place of the current model — two or three years of vocabulary, grammar, and conversation, followed by literature courses — the new approach incorporates more culture from the start. Newspaper clippings, fiction, video clips, and advertisements form an integral part of lessons. Students, for example, become familiar with the German used in political speeches and learn how it differs from that used in a business letter or a soap opera.

Other educators are moving their programs in a similar direction. "The sooner we bring in authentic texts — like literature, film, and TV," says Thomas J. Garza, a professor and chair of the department of Slavic and Eurasian studies at the University of Texas at Austin, "the sooner we'll give [students] cultural literacy."

Upper-level courses continue with an ever-more-sophisticated analysis of the language used in a wide range of cultural expression, and not just what professors consider to be the great literature of the language.
"It's about the appropriate level of language, the right register," says Alex N. Verdaguer, a freshman enrolled in a fourth-year German course at Georgetown. "To talk about death, you need euphemism. Not just 'he died,' but 'he left us on this day.'"

Ignorance of Others

For more than a decade, a few language educators have championed such an approach. But the terrorist attacks of 2001 gave a new impetus to the movement. "After 9/11," says Mr. Levine, "people said we got caught not understanding foreign cultures."

The federal response has been modest, but significant, experts say, and has included the establishment or expansion of several federally funded language programs. For example, National Flagship Language Programs have been established on a dozen campuses to teach high-level language and cultural proficiency in Arabic, Chinese, and other languages considered critical to the nation's security.

In a report issued in May, the Modern Language Association spoke of a widely felt "sense of crisis around ... the United States' inability to communicate with or comprehend other parts of the world." The report, "Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World," offers a strong endorsement for moves to infuse language education with cultural content.

Yet the report goes further, calling for a major reorganization of undergraduate academic programs and even the structure of foreign-language departments.

Typically, the initial two years of language instruction are taught by non-tenure-track instructors with little or no voice in the department. Faculty members mainly teach the literature-heavy upper-level courses. At doctoral institutions especially, there is often little or no cooperation between the two groups. The approach sells short the lower-level language courses, according to the report, by depriving them of the involvement of faculty members with expertise in evaluating and improving language learning.

This model should be replaced by "sustained collaboration" among all members of the teaching corps, to revamp language programs and keep them relevant, the report says.

In addition, departments should broaden their upper-level courses from their current concentration on literature. That focus is increasingly irrelevant, the report says, as students seek to use their language skills in a growing variety of jobs in the globalizing economy.

The report welcomes a trend in which language departments are hiring faculty members with nontraditional specialties in such fields as media, area studies, performance studies, and religion, as well as applied linguists specializing in language acquisition. The report also calls on foreign-language departments to develop more interdisciplinary collaboration with other departments.

That idea of hiring scholars from other disciplines onto language faculties is not supported by everyone. Leading members of Georgetown's German department are skeptical that sophisticated language teaching can be done by scholars from other disciplines. "If someone is an historian," says Peter C. Pfeiffer, an associate professor and former chair of the department, "that person has never had training to connect their specialty to upper levels of language ability."

Saving Language Programs

Despite such quibbles, it is hard to find overt opposition to the new approach. But with departments typically dominated by literature specialists, there is some anxiety. Monika Chavez, a professor of German at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, says that with funding for language departments tight, the report has touched off "heated debate" at her institution over how it might affect jobs and hiring.
Claire J. Kramsch, a professor of German at the University of California at Berkeley and a member of the seven-person committee that wrote the report, says that the new approach "is not controversial intellectually," but is making some people uncomfortable because "it bumps up against department structures."

In addition, students may oppose heavy-handed attempts to add cultural content to their language courses. When Ms. Kramsch's German department polled students about a plan to replace one of five weekly language classes with a class on culture, half the students opposed the idea since they felt it would take too much time away from learning the language.

Still, many educators see the new trend as the only hope to turn around sagging enrollments in languages that used to be popular. Between 1970 and 2002, enrollments in French courses at higher-education institutions fell from 359,313 to 201,979, according to the Modern Language Association's most recent survey. Enrollments in German fell even more sharply, from 202,569 to 91,100. (During the same period, enrollment in Spanish, the most widely studied tongue in the United States, nearly doubled from 389,150 to 746,267).

Departments feel that to attract more students they need to offer them more of an understanding of the politics and cultures of the countries whose languages they are learning. Edith W. Clowes, a professor of Slavic languages and literatures at the University of Kansas, says her department has embraced the new approach "in order to remain relevant" to students.

Adrianna M. Paliyenko, a professor of French and chair of the department of French and Italian at Colby College, adds, "I can't think of any French department that is not grappling with the drop in enrollments." The department used a federal education-department grant to work with other departments to create new interdisciplinary courses, including one on women in French-speaking Africa. In part due to that, she says, the number of French majors has doubled to 60 over the last decade.

### Changing Lessons

Few language departments have radically revamped their academic programs like Georgetown has. But the new approach is already having some broad influence. "If you compare textbooks to those 10 years ago," says Sally S. Magnan, a professor of French at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, "you see that culture is much more engrained."

"It goes well beyond the culture boxes," to which tidbits of culture used to be relegated, she says.

The new approach builds on a major reform in language education that took place three decades ago.

Up until the 1970s, language learning had been based on repetition and drill. The idea was that a language is best learned by repeating vocabulary and grammatical structures over and over until they are memorized. The problem was, while those who learned from that method might be able to read in a foreign language, they were often not very good at talking with native speakers.

Then, in the 1970s, inspired in part by the research of Noam Chomsky suggesting that adults learn a new language the same way little children do — by exploiting innate abilities in order to communicate with those around them — language educators moved toward what was known as the communicative approach. It was based on the premise that learners need extensive practice expressing themselves, especially orally.

The focus on communication led to the development of standards to measure the level a learner has reached. In the mid-1980s, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages adopted proficiency guidelines, similar to standards adopted by the U.S. foreign service a few years earlier. The five-level guidelines, from novice to distinguished, are widely used today, for example, by some institutions as an exit exam for foreign-language majors, and to certify grade-school language teachers.
When the guidelines were being developed, says Marie-Christine W. Koop, a professor of French and chair of the department of foreign languages and literatures at the University of North Texas, educators considered including proficiency standards for culture, but ended up dropping the idea. "The problem with culture," says Ms. Koop, president of the American Association of Teachers of French, "is that it is so vast. Which culture do you evaluate — the culture of the elite, or of the street?"

The communicative approach is credited with helping more students reach a degree of spoken proficiency. But in recent years, as globalization has increasingly challenged Americans to engage with foreigners, educators and policy makers have voiced concern that far too few students graduate from American institutions with the ability to work in another tongue. And of those who do, many have only a shallow understanding of other cultures.

The communicative approach was "a valid goal," when it spread in the 1980s, says Heidi Byrnes, a professor of German at Georgetown who played a central role in the department's transformation over the last decade. But with its typically shallow take on both language and culture, she says, the approach "has created its own glass ceiling." By concentrating on building up students' ability to converse in day-to-day situations, the approach only "brings them to proficiency in chitchat."

The movement to go beyond the communicative approach was given a boost by the so-called "cultural turn" — the tendency in recent decades to emphasize the influence of culture in other disciplines, says Helmut Puff, an associate professor of German and history at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. The number of German majors and minors there has doubled to 220 since the department of Germanic languages and literatures embarked in the mid-1990s on a major drive to make study programs and faculty appointments more interdisciplinary.

The fact that German departments appear especially active in the current reforms is a reaction to the steep fall in enrollments they have suffered since a high point around 1970, scholars say. It may also have to do with the fact that two of the most-prominent proponents of the new approach, Georgetown's Ms. Byrnes, and Berkeley's Ms. Kramsch, are professors of German.

Georgetown's German department worked intensely from 1997 to 2000 to revamp its academic program. All of those who taught, from graduate assistants to full professors, were involved. Unable to find any published textbook series employing their "genres" approach in a coherent progression through the four years of undergraduate study, the department created an entire program from scratch.

The result, says the department's former chair, Mr. Pfeiffer, is "a fully integrated curriculum" that is more effective than the typical collection of individual courses and textbooks. And challenging learners to work with varied expressions of contemporary culture, supporters of the new approach add, is more motivating.