

The French Review

From the Editor's Desk

In March I discussed the May 2007 report of the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages entitled "Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World" and its general observations. I want now to consider its recommendations as they pertain to the goals of language learning and the two-tiered faculty system found in many language departments in American universities today.

For the Committee, the goal is an integrative approach with multiple paths to the major while producing unified, four-year curricula that stimulate language study in cultural, historical, geographic, and cross-cultural frames; and that systematically incorporate transcultural content and translanguing reflection at every level. This approach should produce informed speakers who can operate effectively in the target language rather than try to replicate the competence of an educated native speaker: "They learn to comprehend speakers of the target language as members of foreign societies and to grasp themselves as Americans—that is, as members of a society that is foreign to others" (4). It is precisely this kind of learning that is promoted in Laurence Wylie's and Jean-François Brière's *Les Français* (Prentice-Hall, 2001), a wonderful contrastive approach and introduction to French and American values, mentalities, and presuppositions, but now in need of an update.

The report rightfully emphasizes that we must use all means at our disposal to challenge students' "...imaginings and to help them consider alternative ways of seeing, feeling, and understanding things." The list of what should be taught is long and includes history, geography, culture, and literature of the country or society whose language is being studied. The ability to interpret its radio, television, and print media should also be part of the program. Additionally, the authors would have us teach interpretation and translation, historical and political consciousness, social sensibility, and aesthetic perception; as well as how to do research in the language "using parameters specific to the target language." Although there is more than a touch of American utopian yearning and a large portion of American idealism—"Yes, we can!"—, no one can question the worthiness of these goals.

The integrative approach to fulfilling such far-reaching goals incorporates the conviction that "...more students will continue language study if courses incorporate cultural inquiry at all levels and if advanced courses address more subject areas" (4). For those of us who teach French this means teaching more literatures and cultures of the francophone world beyond France. This is already the case in many programs which reflect the global and diversity requirements of recently adopted core curricula, such as that at my own university. Analysis of cultural narratives should, of course, go beyond traditional literary forms to include journalism, humor, advertising, political rhetoric, and legal documents; "to performance, visual forms, and music."

Students with sufficient proficiency will be given analytic knowledge of specific metaphors and key terms that inform culture across as many areas as one can imagine. These include stereotypes, major competing traditions such as views of the nation that are secularist or fundamentalist, or religious; "symbols or sites of memory in the broadest sense, including buildings, historical figures, popular heroes, monuments, currency, culture-specific products, literary and artistic canons, landscapes, fashion, and cuisine" (5). The list goes on, and I urge you to print out the full report for your own enlightenment. However, it is so

exhaustive and all-inclusive that most of us will have to pick and choose from among the possible areas of study. Indeed, we will have to decide whether we have the expertise necessary to explore *all* the systems, including legal, economic, political, and educational; as well as major scientific and scholarly paradigms, local historiography, sports, etc. in enough depth to make for meaningful learning. It seems to me that more and more courses in all areas of university study have become survey courses (primarily lecture courses) and that depth is losing out to breadth and superficiality in American education; often because universities are afraid of losing students (read dollars). At the same time the authors are right to call for more interdisciplinary courses (with more in-depth work in the higher levels). In fact, such courses are popping up at a dizzying rate under the rubric of "Global Studies," and minors and majors in "Global Studies" are proliferating throughout the United States. Naturally, many of these courses are taught in English, and the hope is that they will attract more students to foreign language study. The jury is not yet in on this question.

The report also calls on universities to strengthen the demand for language competence within the university and points out alarmingly that "the lack of foreign language competence is as much a fact with academic disciplines as in the society at large. Indeed, according to a recent MLA survey, only half of 118 existing Ph.D. programs in English require reading knowledge of two additional languages (Steward 211, table 1; qtd. in report, 7)." Additionally, citation indexes show a steady "...decrease in the use of non-English sources in research across the humanities and social sciences, a deficiency that impoverishes intellectual debate." Amazingly, at the graduate level, "language requirements are notoriously under-enforced across the humanities and the social sciences." In my own university the flagship for the humanities, the History and Philosophy Department (which has recently begun a Ph.D. program) is considering dropping its one-year language requirement at the undergraduate level. Instead of increasing the requirement to two years, a move that seems obvious, some in the department use the convenient argument that one year of a language requirement does not provide enough proficiency. Another relevant observation of the authors is that more and more universities are encouraging short-term study abroad with courses taught in English. This works against longer term programs abroad where course work is done in the target language, in part because many students are reluctant to commit to a year or even a semester of language study abroad. There is also the problem of cost with the weak dollar. I would add that in some language departments there has been an increase in the number of courses taught in English. This happens when writers living in the United States write in both English and another language such as Spanish.

The authors urge language departments to set clear standards of achievement in undergraduate programs in the four skills and to develop the necessary programs to meet the goals. Universities should also establish language requirements (or levels of competence) in the humanities and social sciences, as well as for students in law, medicine, and engineering. This will require cooperation and communication by language departments with colleagues in other departments so that they realize the importance of language requirements in their curricula. Increased funding for graduate students training in languages and language teaching should also be pursued. Ultimately, we must become more active in promoting language study among faculty in other disciplines who want to do research abroad and those who want to learn new languages or improve their current competence.

As concerns the two-tier system, it is essential that both language and literature faculty and staff work cooperatively to develop their programs and that more linguists be hired because of their ability to offer second-language acquisition courses. Adjuncts or part-time assistants, who teach 34.7% of first-year courses in B.A.-granting departments, should be included in the planning and discussion of language and literature curricula since they are an integral part of our departments and programs and share the same mission as other members. Tenure-track faculty should step up and "have a hand in teaching language courses and shaping and overseeing the content and teaching approaches used throughout the curriculum from the first year forward." This will rid us of the current sheep and goats mentality too often prevalent when there are "literature" faculty and "language" faculty.

For the authors of the report this change in the status quo is crucial: "Lack of change will most likely carry serious consequences for both higher education and language learning. Language learning might migrate to training facilities, where instrumental learning will eclipse the deep intellectual learning that takes place on college campuses." They predict that this could happen within ten years. In other words, the elitist tenure-track faculty might end up being hoist on its own petard.

Our continuing priorities must include the promotion of alliances between K-12 educators and college and university faculty members to strengthen language learning at all levels and to foster collaboration (8). I would add that in my view all junior college, college, and university language departments should appoint a liaison to the local high schools. Programs should be developed for gifted learners before college, intensive and immersion programs at the college level, and more languages should be added. Heritage learners should have separate courses which meet their needs, and programs in translation and interpretation should be implemented. Study abroad should be required for the major wherever possible. Foreign-language television programs should be available campus-wide and foreign students should be invited to language classes.

As you can see, the 2007 MLA report is forward-looking and full of useful insights, suggestions, and imperatives. It should, in my view, be discussed and debated in every language and literature department in the country and passed on to deans and other higher administrators. Many of the recommendations should be implemented, particularly those that help propel our students to greater proficiency and enhance communication among all of us who share the mission of teaching foreign languages, cultures, and literatures. Those among us who ignore the report do so at their own peril.

Christopher P. Pinet