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Content, Content, Content:

Teaching Portuguese as a Foreign Language

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"Language is my human endeavor"

[Clarice Lispector. *The Passion According to GH*]

In the department of Portuguese & Brazilian Studies (DPBS), the approach to teaching Portuguese as a Foreign Language (PFL) stems from the faculty's past experiences with bilingual/bicultural training, by drawing specifically upon the philosophy and methodologies of linguistic immersion used to teach Portuguese or English as Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The bilingual/bicultural dynamic taught us early on that the process of learning a second language as well as a foreign language can be a paradigm for learning itself, primarily the discovery of one's own world while discovering someone else's. During the process of acquiring a second/foreign language, students gain knowledge about the way people think and express themselves. Consequently, our teaching philosophy (be it in the foreign language/second language or the literature classroom) has been founded upon the basic principle of generating ideational content via the communication process. In other words, this principle affirms that the target is "FOREIGN LANGUAGE HAS TO BE HONORED AS A MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION IN THE ACQUISITION OF KNOWLEDGE (THAT IS, AS A BRIDGE TO COGNITIVE LEARNING), AND NOT MERELY AS A LINGUISTIC TOOL OR END IN ITSELF. From content-oriented PFL courses, students get "ideas"

they wish to convey in order to further their own quest for knowledge, cultural or socio-political. Thus, content-content-content becomes the educational force, driving our pedagogical strategies.

The threadbare misconception that teaching a foreign language is just a skill that involves no cognitive competence in synthesis and analysis has contributed to the discipline's traditional lack of prestige in academia and, for the most part, in American society. FL pedagogy has a historical reputation in the United States for being perceived erroneously as somehow less intellectually challenging, rather than viewed as part of the University's august and acceptable mission toward the search for knowledge—ideas usually being valued over skills. However, acquiring a FL is not a skill unto itself because conceptual ideas of interpretation and intellectual reflection surface as one learns about the voice, ethos and culture of the target population. For the DPBS, in an effort to reclaim the intellectual challenges reflective of FL and cultural learning, the faculty stresses the “message” above and beyond the form. It is content, not the teaching of the subjunctive tense, that stimulates the learner's curiosity, resulting in the keen perception that the development of FL or SL acquisition becomes vital for exploring intellectual insights about a given cultural mindset as well as for meaningful social transaction. Thus the medium becomes the message in a content-charged curriculum, replete with accessible mini-lectures, films, readings, and short presentations, that are designed to motivate students to think and to speak.

As teachers and trainers within our department, we incessantly convey to Teaching Fellow graduate students, via our mentoring program, the constant need to provide interesting and provocative cultural content from beginning and intensive FL courses up through intermediate and advanced instruction as well as in the introduction to literature and cultural studies courses. In preparing a curriculum for FL and cultural acquisition, our discipline actively draws ideational nourishment from other disciplines such as psychology, art history, anthropology, sociology, history, and/or religious studies, thereby sparking intellectual motivation and consequently driving students toward new pathways of knowledge. This transmission of content is enhanced by an interdisciplinary curriculum that, for example, promotes dialog between literature and cultural anthropology, or history and sociology, accompanied by the significant overall goal of teaching culture as an intrinsic feature of language itself. It is our practice not to separate FL teaching from culture, literature or any other discipline. Ergo, the benefits of a Foreign Languages Across the Curriculum (FLAS) program where diverse subject matters are taught via the FL. When the student recognizes and honors “language as social practice” (Claire Kramsch), culture becomes the core of the curriculum since cross-cultural perspectives reveal unexpected differences and conflicts which

in turn can generate socio-political debate, involving, for instance, the discussion of national identity theories. Ideas, images and ideologies manifested and expressed by the target culture and conveyed via the target language in the classroom, overshadow the actual FL acquisition process because students become more involved in conversation and debate about cultural concepts and world views than in deconstructing linguistic patterns. While grammar, syntax and linguistic structures are infused into this program, these never become the main objective of any given class.

Since all faculty members in DPBS are involved in FL teaching at one time or another, awareness of ideational input has become second-nature. This practice imparts to students the notion that, in this Department, FL teaching is highly regarded and thus cultivated and nurtured. As FL instructors, we are also very sensitive to the performative aspect of language and culture which in the case of Brazil becomes a daily practice and a vibrant way of life manifested by open affective behaviors for expressing the self and its others. In this vein, our field is blessed, given the Brazilian emphasis upon dynamic socialization in which Brazilians are constantly engaging other people into their world, a practice that is pedagogically transmitted to the PFL classroom via the creation of classroom communities. As a result, PFL students soon learn to develop what M.M. Bakhtin called “double-voiced discourse” in which awareness of the other’s voice becomes as important as the voice of the self. Here questions of social identity are explored and challenged. Learning to listen to others contributes to an understanding of society, and a curriculum that stimulates “comprehensible input” (Stephen Krashen) also takes into account the cultural, social, and intellectual needs of student learners.

Along these lines, the above reference to “performance” also points to a new aspect of our curriculum, the successful course, “Performing Brazil,” which develops PFL acquisition via theater, acting techniques, literacy, oral dexterity, and cultural knowledge. In this course, conducted by Dr. Patricia Sobral who was inspired by her participation in the Arts Literacy Program, students are expected to interact with a play’s text, with the instructor as director, with each other as social actors, and with their very self, all performed via the target language. Here language usage is explored and rehearsed in order to express diverse emotions and behaviors manifested by the target culture’s population. The course instills in students the confidence, presence and excitement of thinking, performing and dialoging in a FL. The performance course as innovation also leads to the reevaluation of early entry-level PFL courses that results in alternative and efficient sequencing of language courses which in turn repeatedly foster the goals of a content-based and performative-driven curriculum. These FL/culture courses, set in a natural, relaxed, and “unschooled” ambience,

maintained by a “low-affective filter,” are also designed to maximize the use of oral, visual and electronic cultures, rampant in our contemporary world and reflective of today’s way of life for students. In short, DPBS promotes an information-processing sense of language acquisition, be it foreign or second.

Another example of a content-based approach via the Portuguese language is the Senior Seminar which focuses upon ideas of social, political and cultural thinkers/interpreters/philosophers of Portugal and/or Brazil. Instead of an expected emphasis upon literature, this seminar takes into account the sociological and historical information and analyses that students seek about the mores and behaviors of the target culture. Although its specific topic changes from year-to-year, the seminar’s stress upon the social sciences and culture, in a department with a language and literature core, does address today’s students’ needs and their interests in cross-cultural awareness and globalization.

This curriculum reflects our firm belief that the teaching jointly of culture, social sciences, and literature, transmitted through a foreign language, inevitably leads to the development of thinking in the FL as well as to the reinforcement of strong powers of articulation. Language proficiency thus emanates from the deep structural linguistic level that is attained by listening, speaking, reading, writing, and, above all, thinking and creating. This combination empowers students toward conceptual and critical thought processes via a medium of instruction that is already “set up” pedagogically by the instructor to meet conscious linguistic, cultural, social, and literary goals and activities, whether they be general or very specific. Amidst these goals, achieved via the pedagogical principle of “content-content-content,” emerges the desired analysis of cross-cultural understanding, knowledge and sensitivity.