Reconciling the Language-Literature Split through Literacy

RICHARD KERN

LANGUAGE teaching has historically alternated between scholarly and pragmatic approaches. Whereas the former emphasize grammatical analysis and literature study, the latter emphasize communicative skills for personal and professional purposes. We currently find ourselves in a time when both dimensions of language study are valued but at different levels of the curriculum. In the United States, the first two years of college or university study generally aim to develop learners’ functional ability to communicate their everyday needs, thoughts, and feelings in interpersonal contexts. Advanced-level study (i.e., the third and fourth years) generally aims to sharpen learners’ analytic skills, to improve their ability to express their ideas formally, and to enrich their cultural and literary sensibilities. Although these two sets of goals are not in themselves incompatible, the epistemological bases that underlie the two have traditionally tended, in practice, to conflict and to lead to an articulation gap between beginning-intermediate and advanced course work (Barnett; Henning; Hoffmann and James). Those who teach pragmatic skills generally operate from a belief that the most important learning occurs in the actual process of using a language and that formal analysis, while useful, is of secondary value. Those teaching advanced-level courses, however, put great stock in formal analysis (from the level of sentence grammar to the level of whole texts) as a means to learning. The debate about use versus analysis often leads to methodological dissension between those
This methodological dissension plays out principally along three axes of difference: classroom language, cognitive demands, and classroom culture. Beginning and intermediate courses tend to emphasize language use for everyday social interaction, whereas advanced courses tend to stress formal and literary usage. There is an emphasis on meaning at all levels, but at the introductory levels the focus is often limited to locutionary acts, whereas at the upper end of the curriculum it is illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect that are key to understanding. In terms of cognitive demands, beginning and intermediate courses require substantial effort in memorizing and practicing language forms, but they typically do not challenge students’ thinking. Instead, they tend to focus on personal opinion and ideas already familiar to the student—what William Grabe and Robert Kaplan call “knowledge telling.” Advanced-level courses, however, generally prize learners’ ability to analyze and synthesize material and to develop, refine, and convincingly express new ideas. In terms of classroom culture, teachers typically strive to create a warm and supportive learning environment in the first two years of language study. Classroom tasks are often collaborative, involving small group teams to encourage interaction, and focus on the communication of personal thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Students are urged to relax and “be themselves.” Advanced-level courses, in contrast, are usually content based, organized around lecture and discussion about a particular text or subject. Class activities generally emphasize individual performance in critical discussion and formal oral presentations. Less attention is paid to learners’ comfort level, and interaction tends to be primarily academic in register. These differences in learning tasks and expectations of personal conduct, along with differences in goals, language, and cognitive demands, contribute to a curricular gap that language learners often find difficult to navigate.

This epistemological-linguistic-cognitive-methodological divide is a significant issue for a number of reasons. First, although it begins as a curricular problem, lack of articulation or coherence between lower- and upper-division levels can easily become an enrollment problem if students feel that the instructional emphasis is suddenly shifting in ways for which they feel unprepared. Second, it is a political problem when a perceived language-literature dichotomy drives a wedge between faculty members, with those involved primarily in language teaching seen as second-class citizens in relation to their literature colleagues. Third, by extension, it becomes a professional problem when the dichotomy plays into discussions about the role of second language acquisition in language and literature departments (e.g., VanPatten), affecting hiring, tenure, and promotion decisions nationwide.

I suggest that this language-literature split, like many other dichotomies, is really a matter of perception and framing. Although it may sometimes seem as if we are dealing with hopelessly incommensurate discourses or irreconcilable goals, I propose that dichotomies between lower- and upper-division teaching—between language and literature—can begin to dissolve if we can step back far enough to see the common ground.
What is needed is a way to reconcile an emphasis on face-to-face verbal interaction with the development of learners’ ability to read, discuss, think, and write critically about texts—in other words, a conceptual framework broad enough to accommodate both of them. A first step in this direction is to see the textual as enveloped within a larger framework of the communicative (nothing surprising here, but nevertheless a crucial perspective in working toward a program that connects rather than divides beginning and advanced levels of language learning). The next step is to articulate the bases of connection in a principled way. For this we can draw on the considerable body of scholarship that focuses on relations among reading, writing, and communication—work often labeled as literacy studies. In this article I introduce a particular notion of literacy and discuss its implications for language and literature teaching.

Why Literacy?

*Literacy* is not a word commonly used in the context of foreign language teaching, so I should explain why I have chosen it. I use *literacy* to convey a broader and more unified scope than the terms *reading* and *writing*. *Literacy* facilitates discussion of all the reciprocal relations of readers, writers, texts, culture, and language learning. Moreover, in the context of foreign language teaching, reading and writing are commonly framed as separate skills to be practiced along with the skills of speaking and listening. Reading represents the skills involved in decoding words in order to get meaning, and writing represents the skills involved in putting words on paper in prescribed ways in order to produce meaning. This view, while of course partially true, tends to limit reading and writing to straightforward acts of information transfer. The problem is that this kind of view shortchanges our students at both the lower-division and the upper-division levels.

Research on literacy in disciplines as diverse as anthropology, history, education, rhetoric and composition, psychology, linguistics, and sociolinguistics construes literacy not as a particular criterial set of skills or psychological attributes but rather as a variable collection of dynamic cultural processes. Literacy is about ways of creating and interpreting meaning through texts—which is more than the ability to inscribe and decode written language. Because interpretation lies at the heart of both communicative competence and literary studies, literacy may well offer the common ground necessary for the reconciliation of language and literature teaching. This idea is not new but has developed progressively over the past several decades as an increasing number of scholars have argued for an emphasis on literacy in language education.

Groundwork for Foreign Language Literacy

In 1978, H. G. Widdowson’s seminal *Teaching Language as Communication* emphasized the need to bring out the communicative value of sentences not just their signification. Interpretation was the foundation for all language abilities, and, therefore, developing communicative competence meant developing the ability to interpret discourse. For
Widdowson, achieving this goal required an integrative approach: “What the learner needs to know how to do is to compose in the act of writing, comprehend in the act of reading, and to learn techniques of reading by writing and techniques of writing by reading” (144).

Many of Widdowson’s ideas were extended in two landmark books published in the 1990s: Janet Swaffar, Katherine Arens, and Heidi Byrnes’s *Reading for Meaning* and Claire Kramsch’s *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. Both books argued that a focus on linguistic form without a simultaneous focus on the semantic and pragmatic consequences of form left the links between discourse and culture insufficiently explored. They both articulated visions of foreign language education that shifted emphasis from information processing to a more reflective kind of learning that involved thinking about relations between language and content and thinking about how the details of text affected students’ personal responses to those texts. For Swaffar, Arens, and Byrnes, students must, from the start, do more than just learn vocabulary and grammar and talk about their immediate world; they must develop literacy to function in verbally created worlds (2). For Kramsch, who emphasizes the social dimensions of language learning, the classroom itself should be seen as a kind of text to be interpreted, a “privileged site of cross-cultural fieldwork” (29) where students learn, use, and enjoy the new language, but where at the same time they reflect on that very learning, use, and enjoyment to arrive at a deeper understanding of the language and of themselves as intercultural explorers. In order to accomplish this kind of reflective engagement, Kramsch and Thomas Nolden envision “a new type of literacy” in foreign language education: one that is “centered more on the learner, based more on cross-cultural awareness and critical reflection” (28).

Other foreign language educators have added their voices. Marlies Mueller argues that students need to be made aware of how systems of interpretation are historically created and how they vary over time and place. Russell Berman calls for “foreign cultural literacy” that would highlight the interplay between language and culture not only in the literary canon but also in films, songs, status symbols, political discourse, and everyday language. Richard Jurasek sees literacy as a key concept for curricular integration. He proposes an intermediate-level language curriculum that incorporates what he calls literacy-related inquiry subsets aimed at exploring cultures as perceptual systems and using texts to heighten students’ awareness of how we construct meaning.

Finally, Byrnes and her colleagues in the German department at Georgetown University have recently developed a remarkable literacy-based curriculum. Byrnes reports that designing a curriculum around literacy made it easier to integrate the teaching of language, literary interpretation, and culture. She also notes that the departmental culture was transformed (for the better) in the process of developing the new curriculum.

Although the details of their proposals differ somewhat, Widdowson, Swaffar, Arens, Kramsch, Mueller, Berman, Jurasek, and Byrnes all see reading and writing not as peripheral support skills but as a crucial hub where language, culture, and thought...
They agree on the need to systematically guide learners in their efforts to create, interpret, and reflect on discourse in order to better understand how meanings are made and received, both in their own culture and in a foreign culture.

**Principles of a Sociocognitive View of Literacy**

How can we put notions of literacy to work in designing curriculum in foreign languages? As a starting point, I have proposed a working definition of literacy that weaves together linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural strands. This definition is meant not to describe all forms of literacy but rather to characterize literacy in the specific context of academic foreign language education.

Literacy is the use of socially-, historically-, and culturally-situated practices of creating and interpreting meaning through texts. It entails at least a tacit awareness of the relationships between textual conventions and their contexts of use and, ideally, the ability to reflect critically on those relationships. Because it is purpose-sensitive, literacy is dynamic—not static—and variable across and within discourse communities and cultures. It draws on a wide range of cognitive abilities, on knowledge of written and spoken language, on knowledge of genres, and on cultural knowledge.

This definition is admittedly abstract. But seven principles can be derived from this definition and applied very concretely to language teaching.

1. **Literacy involves interpretation.** When people write, they instantiate a particular interpretation of the world (experiences, events, ideas, and so on). Readers, in turn, interpret the writer’s interpretation in terms of their own conceptions, experiences, and understanding of the world.

2. **Literacy involves collaboration.** Writers always write for someone, even if only for themselves. The content, form, and style of their writing are all based on their understanding of their audience. Readers, in turn, must contribute their motivation, knowledge, and experience in order to make a writer’s text meaningful.

3. **Literacy involves conventions.** How people read and write texts is not universal, but it is governed by cultural conventions that evolve through use and are modified for individual purposes.

4. **Literacy involves cultural knowledge.** Reading and writing function within particular systems of attitudes, beliefs, customs, ideals, and values. Readers and writers who are operating from outside a given cultural system risk misunderstanding, or being misunderstood by, people who are operating on the inside of the cultural system.

5. **Literacy involves problem solving.** Because words are always embedded in linguistic and situational contexts, reading and writing involve figuring out relationships between words, between larger units of meaning, and between texts...
6. *Literacy involves reflection and self-reflection.* Readers and writers think about language and its relations to the world and themselves.

7. *Literacy involves language use.* Literacy is not just about writing systems, nor is it just about lexical and grammatical knowledge. It requires knowledge of how language is used in spoken, as well as written, contexts to create discourse. (Kern 16–17)

Although I have framed these principles in terms of reading and writing, they also apply broadly to communication in general. In fact, the seven principles might be summarized by a macroprinciple: literacy involves communication. This seven-point linkage between literacy and communication has important implications for language teaching since it provides a bridge to span the gap that all too often separates introductory communicative language teaching and advanced literary teaching.

The seven principles of literacy-communication provide some guidance in identifying what and how to teach in order to support a general goal of reflective communication. Conventions, cultural knowledge, and language (principles 3, 4, 7) form the basic elements to be taught, and they are taught in conjunction with the processes of interpretation, collaboration, problem solving, and reflection (principles 1, 2, 5, 6). These elements and processes can be taught through activities that, as a group, address four different but complementary literacy needs of foreign language learners: first, to be immersed meaningfully in written language; second, to receive direct assistance in the complexities of reading and writing foreign language texts; third, to learn to analyze and evaluate what they read; and fourth, to learn how to transform meanings into new representations.

Space does not allow me to demonstrate the concrete application of the seven principles to the teaching of a text. Detailed examples can be found in my book. What is important to clarify is that there is no dogmatic method associated with literacy-based teaching. Rather, learners’ needs can be addressed through a wide variety of instructional activities already familiar to language teachers, such as voluntary reading, readers’ theater, reading journals, freewriting, semantic mapping, discussions based on critical focus questions, textual comparisons, translation, summary writing, stylistic pastiches, and other kinds of textual reformulations. Introducing literacy-based teaching is not so much a question of applying new techniques as it is of adopting a critically reflective stance in relation to what happens in the classroom.

**Goals of a Literacy-Based Curriculum**

In attempting to resolve the tension between language and literature teaching we don’t want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. We need to maintain an emphasis on communicative language use, but we can work toward bridging the gap in three ways. First, at the beginning and intermediate levels of the curriculum, we need to push beyond...
basic interpersonal communication skills. Although these are necessary, they are not sufficient for the ability to interpret a wide range of discourse types in the foreign language. What is called for is a broader notion of communication as designing meaning and early exposure to a variety of signifying practices (written and spoken; verbal and nonverbal) in the target culture. That is to say, students should be exposed not only to multiple genres and language varieties but also to visual, musical, and artistic expression in the target culture. And it is important that they be engaged in analysis and transformation of this material. Cognitively demanding (but linguistically feasible) tasks from the beginning of foreign language study stimulate intellectual engagement and will help ease the transition to upper-division course work. It is important, however, not to unduly emphasize the cognitive at the expense of the humanistic side of language learning. As Roy Freedle observes:

By paying a little more time to the humanistic side of learning [. . .] we begin focusing upon the most general basis for motivating literacy—the desire to communicate with others. Establishing skill in communication first requires establishing a sound relationship between teacher and student. Without this relationship there is precious little possibility for communication and hence precious little need for honing the tools of communication, namely, learning the skills of literacy. (125–26)

Second, at the upper end of the curriculum, we need to move away from a narrow view of reading and writing as literary activities useful primarily for those who will specialize in literature to a broader notion of reading and writing as communicative processes that create and transform knowledge—processes that lie at the intersection of language, thought, and culture.

Third, we need to encourage learners at all levels of the curriculum to reflect critically on communication in all the forms its takes. This involves a balance of subjective involvement and objective distance with regard to the students’ own and others’ language use. That is, we still want to teach students to do things with words, but we also want them to reflect on how things are done in their native language and culture as compared with the ways they are done in the new language and culture.

In sum, a literacy-based curriculum assumes the primary importance of developing communicative ability in a new language, but it also emphasizes within that general goal the development of learners’ ability to analyze, interpret, and transform discourse—and to think critically about how discourse is used toward various social ends. In other words, it emphasizes both oral and written communication, but communication that is informed by a metacommunicative awareness of how meaning is created from relations among language use, contexts of interaction, and larger sociocultural contexts. A literacy-based curriculum is thus neither purely structural nor purely communicative in nature but instead attempts to relate communicative and structural dimensions of language use, as shown in table 1.
The problem we need to address is the perceived gap between what we do at the lower-division level and the upper-division level of the language-literature-culture curriculum. This gap is real, but it is also constructed—and it can be deconstructed. The task before us is to frame things right, in order to make curriculum and instruction fall into better alignment—an alignment that is perceivable by both students and teachers.

This realignment involves a reassessment of our priorities in teaching foreign languages at the college and university level. In broad terms, I am arguing for a renewed and invigorated focus on written communication. This does not mean that I am suggesting that spoken communication should be deemphasized. Quite the contrary. But experience seems to show again and again that learners cannot develop the kind of spoken communication ability required in academic settings without a serious commitment to the study of written communication. This is because so much oral communication for academic purposes requires literate sensibilities about the particular ways the foreign language can be used in written contexts. It also requires a familiarity with the cultural premises that underlie communication in another society, which, in the absence of lived experience in that society, is most often gained through immersion in texts.

Texts (and here I intend a broad conception of the term—written, oral, visual, and audiovisual) offer learners new aesthetic experiences as well as content to interpret and critique. The point is not just to give students something to talk about for the sake of practicing language but also to engage them in the thoughtful and creative act of making connections among grammar, discourse, and meaning; between language and content; between language and culture; between another culture and their own. A literacy-based curriculum thus squarely addresses what Swaffar has defined as the core of foreign language study: “a discipline [. . .] that asks the question, How do individuals and groups use words and other sign systems in context to intend, negotiate, and create meanings?” (7)

The emphasis on thinking and interpretation in a literacy-based curriculum can help us break down the walls that divide language and literature teaching by blurring the line between language skills and academic content. When language use becomes an object of reflection it constitutes a source of intellectual content. If we can teach our students early on to reflect on how a foreign language is used in particular contexts for particular effects, to analyze texts to uncover cultural assumptions, and to talk and write about their findings, we can begin to close the language-literature gap and can ultimately enhance the coherence of language teaching and learning at all levels of language study.

The author is Associate Professor of French at the University of California, Berkeley. This article is based on his presentation at ADFL Seminar East in Middlebury, Vermont, 7–9 June 2001.
Note

This article is based on material from my book *Literacy and Language Teaching*, copyright © Oxford University Press 2000.

Works Cited


Berman, Russell A. “Reform and Continuity: Graduate Education toward a Foreign Cultural Literacy.” *ADFL Bulletin* 27.3 (1996): 40–46. [Show Article]


Hoffmann, Ernst Fedor, and Dorothy James. “Toward the Integration of Foreign Language and Literature Teaching at All Levels of the College Curriculum.” *ADFL Bulletin* 18.1 (1986): 29–33. [Show Article]

Table 1
Summary of Goals of Structural, Communicative, and Literacy-Based Curricula

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structural Emphasis</th>
<th>Communicative Emphasis</th>
<th>Literacy Emphasis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowing Usage</td>
<td>Doing Use</td>
<td>Doing and reflecting on doing in terms of knowing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language forms</td>
<td>Language functions</td>
<td>Usage-Use relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement (i.e., display of knowledge)</td>
<td>Functional ability to communicate</td>
<td>Form-function relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Communicative appropriateness informed by metacommunicative awareness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kern 304