



Milton M. Azevedo. *President's Message: December, 2009*. The American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese: <<http://www.aatsp.org>>.

### **On the Situation of Language Program Directors**

*Saudações, saludos, greetings.* As my very

satisfying term as President of the AATSP draws to a close, I would like to share with you a few thoughts on the role of Language Program Directors (LPDs), based on my own experience and on recent informal conversations with a handful of colleagues who hold or used to hold that position.

The role of LPDs is crucial in doctorate-granting departments offering multi-section courses, typically at large public universities, where, according to a report by the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages ("Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World," *Profession 2007*, 234-245), 57.4% of first-year language courses are taught by graduate student teaching assistants (241). In such departments the LPD, often working alone, provides teaching assistants with indispensable training and supervision, without which multi-section courses would quickly slip into chaos.

At many institutions a master's degree still suffices for appointment as an LPD, although increasingly a doctoral degree is required. A few decades ago, the preferred field of specialization was applied linguistics, but that requirement is being superseded by that of specialist in second language acquisition, although one also sees announcements asking for a degree in the linguistics of the language involved. Yet a doctorate is no guarantee of full faculty

status, for PhD-holding LPDs often hold non-tenurable positions renewable annually, normally as lecturers, or in some cases under qualified professorial titles such as "Professor of Practice," or "Professor, Teaching." As in any status-conscious profession, titles send a powerful message, and anything other than the traditional *Assistant/Associate/Full Professor* ranks suggests a not-quite-so-equal arrangement. In fact, lacking full faculty status, LPDs do not participate in the departmental decision-making process to the same extent as regular faculty. In some departments they do not participate at all, even when decisions affect the language programs they direct.

This lack of status, which entails limited authority, fosters an uncertain relationship between LPDs and some of their supervisees, who, believing they are training to become regular faculty members at research institutions—an increasingly dubious assumption in view of the growing number of adjuncts—may be less prone to accept the authority of a supervisor outside the professorial category. Complaints about their ambiguous—when not downright lower—institutional status arise frequently in conversations with LPDs. Another common complaint concerns lack of professional recognition by administrators and colleagues. As one LPD observed, "when everything goes well, nobody notices you, but when something goes wrong, like when TAs start complaining about something, they [the regular faculty] immediately ask how come you aren't doing something about it." Since many of these critics, often literature specialists, may not have taught a language course since graduate school, serious misunderstandings can easily ensue about what the LPD position entails. Nor do colleagues and administrators realize that LPDs are overworked. In a major department an LPD can find him/herself coordinating forty or fifty sections of first- and second year language courses, often without assistance, and even doing clerical work that could be done by a staff person or a work-study student. Unlike regular faculty on a nine-month contract, LPDs often continue working

after the end of the term, wrapping up their administrative work and thus forfeiting research/study time. In addition, they start working before the new academic year begins, preparing syllabi, readers, placement tests, and training sessions for the new teaching assistants.

As if all this were not enough, many LPDs receive little or no encouragement for professional development through participation in conferences and workshops away from campus. Institutions that offer LPDs released time and travel funds to attend such events seem to be the exception rather than the rule. And even when the LPDs do research, present papers, or publish articles in their field, they may receive scant recognition, since those activities are seen as pedagogically-oriented, and therefore, as one LPD put it, "aren't taken seriously by literature specialists."

Although LPDs usually get some time off from teaching to attend to their many administrative responsibilities, given that they are expected to visit classes regularly to evaluate the teaching assistants' performance, such released time is rarely sufficient. Some basic arithmetic can be enlightening. A course meeting three times a week for fifteen weeks involves 45 hours of class contact, plus about 2 hours of work per class meeting for preparation and correction, totaling 135 hours. In other words, a one-course release provides the LPD with 135 hours for administrative activities. Now, to be effective visits should last the whole class period (one hour) and be followed by a meeting (about thirty minutes) for discussing the instructor's performance. Then a thoughtful report must be written to be filed for future reference (again, about thirty minutes). Thus, each visit consumes about two hours. In a situation involving thirty instructors, the LPD spends  $120 \text{ minutes} \times 30 \text{ visits} = 3600 \text{ minutes}$ , that is sixty hours per semester. Consequently, visiting will take up over one third of each released course, leaving about seventy-five hours for other administrative work such as, *inter alia*, developing and

coordinating the language program, preparing syllabi, training and supervising teaching assistants, acting as a link with other campus units, testing students from other departments seeking proficiency certificates, choosing and ordering textbooks for all courses under their supervision, preparing or supervising the preparation, correction, and grading of exams for multi-section courses, providing solutions to students' complaints, and making decisions on plagiarism charges —the list could go on.

Given the situation just described, it is imperative that university administrators demonstrate they recognize the importance of LPDs as gatekeepers of language teaching, ever more pressing in a shrinking world, by according them a professional status commensurate to their role in this crucial enterprise. Minimally, PhD-holding LPDs should enjoy full faculty rank, including the right to vote on departmental matters, have sufficient released time and clerical support for their administrative duties, and have time—including sabbaticals—to study and do research that would benefit the programs they direct. Only thus will universities ensure LPDs professional development and effectiveness in fulfilling their essential work.

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I wish you all a very pleasant Holiday Season, followed by a happy productive New Year, and invite you to make our 2010 congress a great success. *Hasta Guadalajara, y ¡todos a la una!*