

White Paper: Best Practices for Graduate Student Instruction

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As many in our profession have long noted (Allen & Negueruela-Azarola, 2010; Brandl, 2000; Byrnes, 2001), preparing graduate students to become excellent collegiate language instructors requires a collaborative, long-term view of language teacher education that involves a network of mentors within departments, institutional units, and professional organizations.

My discussion on best practices for Graduate Student Instructors (GSIs) of German begins with a familiar (and admittedly tired) discussion of departmental cultures in which the bifurcated undergraduate curriculum continues to persist despite our profession's better knowledge of alternative curricular structures that teach language and content as interconnected learning goals (Lomicka & Lord, 2018). It is well known that the well-documented and artificial division between language and content instruction, still found today in many German doctoral granting programs, does not serve graduate students particularly well in preparing them for future collegiate teaching assignments. Indeed, doctoral students who adopt this divided mindset are likely to be ill prepared to teach undergraduates in smaller German departments where knowledge of course staging across an entire curriculum is essential for program survival. To help overcome this bifurcated model, Language Program Directors (LPDs) and others who serve as core teaching mentors to GSIs in US doctoral programs, need the continued support of our professional organizations—such as the AATG and the MLA—to help us in communicating to our colleagues the importance of designing curricular structures whose learning goals at every instructional level are geared towards the development of sophisticated language abilities, deep intercultural understanding, and meaningful content knowledge. (The ADFL-MLA Language Consultancy Service and the AATG workshops on curriculum design already serve as exemplary models towards this goal. More support and advocacy are needed though.)

To remain competitive in the academic job market, PhDs will be increasingly expected to teach across an undergraduate curriculum, which includes experience in teaching advanced second language (L2) levels. Yet, conversations with colleagues in the field reveal that many programs do not—or cannot (often due to institutional constraints)—provide graduate students with opportunities to teach upper-division courses, let alone offer course work or explicit guidance for teaching more advanced levels. Advanced graduate coursework in language pedagogy, curriculum design, and applied linguistics has been advocated for some time with many good models to consider (e.g., Blyth, 2013; Melin, 2000). Such courses, however, are likely to appear primarily in PhD programs where applied linguistics represents a degree track. By contrast in many literary and cultural studies departments, opportunities for extended study on the scholarship of teaching and learning beyond the “methods course” remain limited. Till such coursework becomes part of formal graduate study, what can German Studies programs do to prepare graduate students to become excellent teachers of German at all levels, with a keen understanding of how to teach language and content in a truly integrated manner?

Research on the learning-to-teach process tells us that it takes time for individuals to develop expertise and that multi-faceted mentoring is best fostered within a strong community network (Tsui, 2003). Supporting GSIs of German to develop the expertise required of them in post-secondary institutions therefore must take myriad forms from meaningful coursework on language pedagogy and applied linguistics (with the methods course playing a critical role) to apprenticeship models (e.g., Kost, 2008; UT-Austin) to reflective teaching practices and research-based materials/course development opportunities that support graduate students' development as teacher-scholars (Eigler & Ryshina-Pankova, 2016). Given the intense pressures doctoral candidates in foreign language programs face in completing their degrees today (rigorous benchmarks, conference presentations and publications, fellowship and grant applications), the challenge for programs—and for LPDs often leading the charge—is to find sustainable models that explicitly connect scholarship and praxis to each other in strategic ways. I offer here three models from our profession that can support GSIs at different stages in their teaching development.

High-leverage Teaching Practices (HLTPs) offer novice instructors empirically-based core teaching practices made up of complex instructional moves that can be deconstructed and learned by new teachers while having a powerful impact on student learning. HLTPs in foreign language (FL) education include such key practices as “facilitating target language comprehensibility” and “building a classroom discourse community” (Glisan & Donato, 2017; Troyan, Davin, & Donato, 2013). Because HLTPs are based on principles established through scholarship of learning and teaching, they offer principled action that goes beyond mere “best practices” (Glisan & Donato, 2017) and are increasingly becoming core practices in FL methods coursework (Troyan, Davin, & Donato, 2013). Integrating key HLTPs into FL pedagogy seminars can provide novice GSIs with immediate tools that can be refined over time through guided observation and practice in the classroom. Additional core practices can be targeted through further coursework and/or teaching workshops in subsequent semesters. More recent research on HLTPs has expanded the focus from interactive speaking and oral corrective feedback—practices that tend to align with communicative language teaching found in beginning and intermediate language instruction—to leading open-ended discussions (Kearney, 2015) and drawing on literacy-based approaches to language learning (Paesani & Allen, 2016)—both practices that are immediately applicable in advanced L2 instruction. Because HLTPs are derived from research, we urgently need more empirical studies on advanced L2 learning (see, e.g., Paesani & Allen, 2012). This means documenting successful instructional practices that explicitly target upper levels of language instruction, orient towards literacy development across multiple modalities, and teach for integrated language-content learning goals. Such research would help to inform the kinds of HLTPs that GSIs—and the profession at large—can draw on to most successfully teach advanced courses in the target language.

Research-based materials development work provides yet another key to supporting GSIs. Developing instructional materials that target language and content learning goals simultaneously is complex, serious intellectual work that draws on both content and pedagogical knowledge. Initiatives like COERLL/CERCLL’s “Foreign Languages and the Literary in the Everyday” (FLLITE) provide excellent mentoring and publishing opportunities for FL instructors at all levels to develop expertise in designing smart literacy-based materials. By centering this materials development work around the notion of “language play” (genre, symbolic, grammar, narrative play, etc.), the FLLITE project explicitly attempts to “bridge the language/literature divide still prevalent in FL programming and textbooks” (<http://fllite.org/project/approach/>). All lessons are peer-reviewed through a supportive community of practitioners and reach a wide audience through the site’s open educational resource (OER) platform. In this way, the project promotes materials development as scholarly activity.

A final model that can support graduate students in their development as teachers is exploratory practice, an inclusive practitioner research model that grew out of the need to support sustainable professional development for busy language teachers who wanted to develop understanding about their learning and teaching, but were unable to carry out large-scale research projects in their own classrooms (Hanks, 2017; Allwright & Hanks, 2009). The model encourages teachers—with their learners as co-practitioners—to think about the learning-teaching process in terms of ‘puzzles’ rather than problems to be solved and advocates drawing on existing resources (from one’s pedagogy, conversation with colleagues, looking to scholarship, etc.) to develop understanding. In this process of trying to understand what happens in the classroom, instructors develop localized and therefore personally meaningful insights about learning and teaching that can have immediate relevance for their students’ learning. When formally supported (e.g., through exploratory practice groups, coursework, or larger community—see, e.g., Crane, et al., 2013), exploratory practice can help GSIs cultivate a true regular practice of inquiry in their classrooms.

As Allen & Negueruela-Azarola (2010) note in their review of the research on graduate student teacher education, no “one size fits all” approach is likely to work when it comes to preparing graduate students to become successful collegiate-level language instructors. Working together and drawing on resources in our departments, across language units and other support structures on our campuses (e.g., graduate schools and centers of teaching excellence), as well as our professional organizations are likely to be our best avenues for developing expertise and heightening awareness of the value of this important work.

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