

The Language Departments and AI Preparation

Indiana University is famous for its foreign languages—over 70 are taught on a regular basis (every letter of the alphabet except for V!), and some programs are unique, from the new Department of Second Language Studies to the nationally renowned SWSEEL summer workshop which offers most of the languages of the former Soviet Union and neighboring countries. Despite the fact that our language offerings span numerous departments and radically different language families, we share many commonalities. Foreign language instruction is fortunate to have a long history of pedagogy and in the present day has a methodology (the communicative approach) that is almost universally accepted and practiced throughout the United States. Foreign language instruction is even graced with a textbook (*Teaching Language in Context*, by Omaggio Hadley) which is used in a majority of foreign language methodology courses across the country. Language instruction is also brought together by the similarly daunting task of teaching a skill that requires cumulative mastery at every step and active, production-based practice every single class day to an American audience (which traditionally considers itself “bad at languages”). These courses demand very close, interpersonal interaction with a group of students who feel more like an extended family than a classroom of strangers.

Teaching in this environment necessitates not only an understanding of the overarching philosophy of the communicative approach but also a facility with an extensive and varied collection of techniques, strategies, and activities needed to meet the demands of the gamut of learning styles, personalities, reservations, phobias, and abilities. Below are examples of best practices that make our foreign language programs a useful case study for AI preparation for teaching.

INITIAL ORIENTATION AND TRAINING OF AIs

The teaching responsibilities in foreign language departments are somewhat unusual in that AIs, rather than assisting a professor or leading discussion sections, typically have full responsibility for teaching entire elementary or intermediate level language classes. While proficiency in the foreign language

is assumed, it is not considered sufficient for teaching success. As described above, foreign language instruction today is based on specific theoretical approaches and techniques, and it is crucial that instructors gain familiarity with these before entering the classroom.

To this end, most language departments at IU require new instructors to attend a one- to two-week pre-semester intensive pedagogical workshop. These workshops address the logistics of teaching a class (how to organize a grade book; professionalism; student-teacher relations; classroom seating arrangements, etc.) as well as language specific concerns moving from the general (how to structure a lesson plan) to the specific (how to teach vocabulary; grammar; listening; speaking; reading; writing; testing). While theory is touched on, the focus is on the practical aspects of teaching. The workshops culminate in a microteaching experience in which new instructors teach portions of a lesson or an entire class, either to a group of actual undergraduate students or to their AI cohorts, and receive constructive feedback afterwards. In this way new graduate instructors, in a relatively minimum amount of time, are maximally prepared to assume the role of teacher and confront their classes of up to 23 undergraduates typically enrolled in each section on the first day of classes in the fall.

In language departments, AI training is an ongoing process and instructors are usually required to take a three-credit course in language teaching methodology during their first year. This course complements the fall workshops, and while remaining focused on practical aspects of teaching, tends to provide a more in-depth view of current theory and contextualizes the language teaching profession historically. Some departments, for example the Department of French and Italian, also require a one-credit teaching practicum. This course, which takes place during fall semester, is organized around a series of classroom observations in which AIs observe different model teachers, each time focusing on one or two specific aspects of their teaching. The goal is to heighten new instructors' awareness of good teaching practices, and reinforce the material learned

in the workshop. While many language departments with a well-established tradition of language pedagogy offer such discipline-specific college pedagogy courses (e.g., the Departments of Slavic Languages and Literatures, Germanic Studies, French and Italian), other departments organize regular workshops for their language instructors (e.g., the Department of Central Eurasian Studies). These pedagogy courses and workshops serve as a forum to share successful ideas, practices and materials among teachers locally.

Language AIs may have additional instructional opportunities to extend their language, literature, and culture teaching repertoire. For example, most departments encourage their instructors to provide opportunities for language practice for their learners outside the classroom. These “language tables,” “tea hours”, or “coffee hours” provide AIs with extra opportunities to develop their organizational and teaching skills in a more informal context with students from a variety of classes and levels.

ONGOING SUPPORT FOR AIs

In addition to methodology courses, pre-semester orientation workshops, class observations, and weekly AI meetings organized by departmental language coordinators, a wide array of pedagogy activities initiated at the departmental, college, and national level is open to all language AIs and language coordinators. Almost every year there is a major foreign language pedagogy event held on campus, such as the hosting of the national “Workshop on the Teaching of Pragmatics in a Second/Foreign Language Context” in 2005 and the workshop “ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) Familiarization and Implications for Instruction” in 2007. The Inner Asian and Uralic National Resource Centre provides an annual pedagogy workshop targeting less commonly taught languages, which also attracts professionals from outside IU, and the bi-annual McGraw-Hill Satellite Teleconference and Webcast on Topics in Second Language Acquisition is broadcast every autumn around mid-October of even-numbered years. Perhaps the crown jewel of events is

the Foreign Language Share Fair, which provides an excellent opportunity for instructors to share interesting and innovative teaching ideas, feed off the energy of colleagues, and experience a common sense of purpose and camaraderie. The event, held each semester, is taped and presentations are accessible online (<http://www.indiana.edu/~shfair/shfair.html>).

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE COORDINATORS

Language coordinators, representing professionals from numerous language departments across campus, provide instructional and logistical support to AIs. Language coordinators and peer instructors perform regular class observations and provide regular feedback and performance appraisal to AIs. Language coordinators also encourage AIs to attend or present research at local, regional, and national conferences which have significant pedagogy content. For example, the annual IU Association of Central Eurasian Students (ACES) conference provides a forum for presentation on “Central Asian Language Pedagogy” and “Finno-Ugric Languages and Their Acquisition.”

The language coordinators seek out common venues of cooperation and professional development, including attending workshops and presenting at conferences. The Center for Language Technology and Instructional Enrichment (CeLTIE) at IU organizes monthly meetings for language coordinators to address specific issues of language instruction. Furthermore, the Language Coordinators from four departments (CEUS, FRIT, GER, SLAV) contribute to the campus conversation about the preparation of AIs for teaching through their participation in the Preparing Future Professors Faculty Learning Community facilitated by Campus Instructional Consulting.

CAMPUS SUPPORT FOR LANGUAGE AIs

In particular, two campus offices provide assistance and development opportunities to AIs and language coordinators beyond the instructional support available at the department level. The Center for Language Technology and Instructional Enrichment (CeLTIE) is committed to improving and maintaining excellence in language instruction. They provide technological support classroom for instructors and assist those engaged in language research (<http://www.indiana.edu/~celtie>). In addition, the Office of Campus Instructional Consulting offers complementary workshops which address topics of test writing, designing grading rubrics, etc.

- *Beatrix Burghardt, Language Coordinator, Department of Central Eurasian Studies; Jeff Holdeman, Language Coordinator, Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures; Kelly Sax, Senior Lecturer and Coordinator of French Language Instruction, Department of French and Italian*