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AUTHOR Lide, Francis
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ABSTRACT

The view that foreign language study contributes significantly to literacy in the native language is discussed from the perspectives of a foreign language teacher who also teaches English composition. It is suggested that there is a need for research and publications on the benefits of second language study on native language growth and on cognitive growth in general. Benefits traditionally claimed for foreign language study include the enhancement of vocabulary in the mother tongue, learning grammar (i.e., linguistic features and principles and literacy), syntactic fluency, and the ability to pronounce foreign words and proper names. It is suggested that when foreign language students practice shifts and transformations of tense and voice, the same operations are being made silently in the mother tongue. Moreover, many freshman English students have a defective tense system and difficulty in the use of the perfect tenses. It is noted that sentence-combining exercises are valuable, and that translation into English is an excellent writing exercise. It is recommended that students be made aware of the contribution of foreign language study to their linguistic knowledge and first-language skills and that foreign language teachers should assess and improve students' first-language proficiencies. In addition, it is suggested that foreign language teachers should communicate more with linguistics and English composition teachers. (SW)

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Francis Lide

Francis Lide
Department of Humanities
Michigan Technological Univ.
Houghton, MI 49931

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Second-Language Study and First-Language Literacy:
Old Arguments and New Perspectives

Paper delivered at the Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, March 25, 1983.

Among foreign language teachers, the view that second-language study contributes significantly to literacy in the native tongue is so widely held and of such long standing that the audience is probably wondering if anything new can be said about it. I stand before you, however, with a professional background that has enabled me to gain some new perspectives on the old arguments surrounding the topic. After fourteen years as a German teacher on four campuses, I found it necessary to retrain myself as a teacher of freshman English. Since I joined it, my department, a department of humanities in an engineering school, has become one of the most professionally active departments of rhetoric and composition in the country. I have attended and participated in many national conventions of writing teachers, and I have familiarized myself with the professional literature in connection with a number of research projects in composition. I am therefore in a position to view the topic not only from the perspective of a foreign language teacher, but also from that of the field to which society has given the primary charge of transmitting literacy to the young.

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Foreign language teachers have usually stated the case for their contribution to their students' native-language literacy in casual and random fashion as a truism. There has been little attempt to research the matter comprehensively in its mechanisms and scope, to state the case forcefully, to disseminate it among teachers in the field, or to document it convincingly for our constituency both inside and outside the classroom. As a result of this neglect, the view that such a contribution exists enjoys little credit or support with at least three crucial groups in American education: students who resist studying foreign languages, professional educationists, and teachers of English composition at the college and high school levels.

As for the first group, it must be conceded that the view that growth in native-language literacy is an important justification and byproduct of foreign language study, though valid, lacks plausibility on its face. It is open to the counter-argument that learning the workings, grammar, and vocabulary of a foreign language is a roundabout way to improve one's literacy in one's own. Couldn't these educational goals be achieved more efficiently by studying these things directly in the English class? The answer is that it would probably take half again as many English courses to produce the same result, that most present-day English teachers lack the inclination--and frequently the background--to devote themselves

to the code-related aspects of written and spoken discourse, and that many things about one's own language can be learned most efficiently in a contrastive context.

In 1975 and 1976, the long and uninterrupted slide in verbal SAT scores--and the accompanying poor reading and writing performance of college undergraduates--created, with almost explosive suddenness and force, a public awareness of a literacy crisis in our school-age population. I have researched the news accounts, two books, and a blue-ribbon report that appeared as a result of this perceived crisis. Neither of the books--and none of the many English-composition educators interviewed in the news accounts--mentioned one obvious causative factor: the widespread elimination of college foreign language requirements and the resulting erosion of foreign language study in the schools

When a commission was appointed to study the drop in SAT scores, some members of the foreign language profession apparently made a case before it, for the published report noted that it had been "pressed strongly on the panel" that there was a connection between the drop in high school foreign language enrollments and in the average scores on the verbal portion of the SAT test. Our spokesmen got nowhere with the anonymous educationists on the commission's staff who did its real work. This was despite the fact that those takers of the SAT test who had studied four or more years of high school foreign

languages scored an average of more than 100 points higher than those who had taken no foreign language, and that "the averages [rose] progressively with the number of courses taken." This 100-point correlation--the word correlation was a word the authors of the report would not even use--was twice as large as the entire forty-nine-point drop in average SAT verbal scores from 1964 to 1977 that occasioned the study in the first place. The report's authors chose to explain away the evidence, citing a number of statistical factors and implying that the 100-point differential in SAT scores merely showed that elitist, upper-middle-class, and otherwise high-scoring students took more foreign language courses.¹

As for our colleagues in English who teach writing, one would think that they, as fellow students of language and literature, would share our conviction that foreign language study contributes to native-language literacy. After all, the fact that Anglicists teach written discourse in the native tongue while Gallicists, say, are foreign language teachers is an accident of geography. If we were in France, the Gallicists would be teaching writing, while the Anglicists would be foreign language teachers. Supposedly, the close connection between foreign languages and English is expressed in the fact that both are together in the Modern Language Association. Unfortunately, however, there is little evidence of any feeling that composition teachers might derive insights from the foreign

language profession, and I sense a strong resistance to the proposition that foreign language study contributes to growth in the mother tongue. The truth is, indeed, that the attitude of English composition teachers toward foreign languages and their academic practitioners is largely one of indifference if not hostility.

As a foreign language teacher who also teaches English composition, I can confirm this indifference many times over. I have searched the periodical literature in rhetoric and composition for the past decade and the ERIC documents and major convention programs for the last five years. The few ideas taken from ESL have flared up only briefly before sputtering out, while any impulses from foreign language pedagogy have been nonexistent--this despite the tendency of composition specialists to import ideas liberally from other disciplines. Indeed, a well-known volume that summarizes composition research for teachers in the field contains a prominently authored chapter entitled "Composition and Related Fields." The chapter makes no mention of foreign languages.²

In 1978, the theme of the Conference on College Composition and Communication was "Writing: A Cross-Disciplinary Enterprise." There was no mention of foreign languages in any of the titles of papers appearing on the program. At a session on grammar I attended at the 1981 convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, the head of a high school English department asked the panelists how she should

respond to parents who insist that English teachers teach grammar. In a tone of marked exasperation and hostility, she added, "and they trot out all the foreign language teachers to back them up!" And at the MLA convention in 1982, there was a special session, in the hotel reserved for English, on "The Learning of a Foreign Language and its Effect on English Composition." When the twenty people in the audience were polled, all turned out to be foreign language teachers.

The indifference toward the foreign language discipline on the part of composition professionals is grounded in our different wavelengths and conceptions of writing. We in the foreign language profession define writing as one of the four language skills. We conceive of learning to write as language learning in the grapholect or standard written language, and we are conditioned to mastering the rules of written languages with great rapidity, precision, and detail. To do less in our respective target languages would be to cast doubts on our own professional competence. We are formalists and applied linguists who define writing in terms of the sign system. But nowadays formalism has very few adherents in the composition fraternity, whose members consider it the old and anti-innovative way of approaching the subject. Rather, the dominant approach to composition today is mentalistic. It emphasizes invention, or discovering what one has to say; it emphasizes multiple drafts and the writing process, and with few exceptions any attempt to look at writing in formalistic terms tends to be dismissed as product-oriented.

When our former students try to make generalizations based on what their own foreign language study contributed to their native-language literacy, they usually do so in terms of grammar. As a result, they are frequently shot down by composition teachers. At a social hour during a writing-across-the-curricula workshop at my institution several years ago, a math teacher in her fifties casually stated that she had picked up most of her knowledge of grammar in Latin class, implying that this fact was not without significance for educational policy. She was dismissed by the workshop's director with a snorted obscenity. And at a recent year-end kegger for German students, one student expressed similar views about grammar in the foreign language classroom. Her remarks were overheard by a very knowledgeable colleague in English education, who broke into the conversation and contradicted her, stating that grammar is unimportant for writing. The student so contradicted was a graduate student in engineering from Poland--one of those marvelously multilingual Slavs who is fluent and literate in English, French, German, and Russian in addition to her native language.

My colleague was defending a piety of twenty years' standing in English composition, the following statement from a 1963 survey of composition research:

In view of the widespread agreement of research studies based on many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing.³

Many foreign language teachers have probably encountered this oft-cited statement in one form or another. It has, however, been contradicted very energetically and effectively in a recent article, which points out, among other things, that the studies cited in the report were antiquated, and that they mainly involved memorizing rules and applying labels, with little or no direct application to the construction of the students' own sentences.⁴

Even if the validity of the 1963 statement were conceded, any negative effects of studying formal grammar could not be laid at the feet of foreign language teachers, for our use of formal grammar is in addition to whatever exposure students get in their English classes. Nor could anything be farther from memorizing rules and definitions and applying labels than the use of grammar in foreign language instruction. Our grammar is a contrastive pedagogical grammar that isolates each minimal grammatical feature, describes it with just enough terminology to give learners command over the targeted structure, and immediately applies the principles learned to generating that structure. No wonder many people in their fifties and older say they acquired their sense of grammar in their Latin or modern language classes, despite the massive doses of grammar instruction common in English classes three decades or more ago. Not only have foreign language teachers been more pedagogical and skillful in their use of grammar as a teaching tool; in contrast to the situation in English classes, students in foreign languages know they need to command the terminology

and the principle if they are to generate or comprehend the targeted structure. Here as elsewhere in foreign language study, the workings of language are demonstrated and practiced in immediate operational contexts.

When our former students assert that they learned their grammar in the Latin or foreign language class, they lay themselves open to contradiction from anyone who has absorbed a smattering of linguistics at second or third hand. These "experts" will reject as ignorant all definitions of grammar except the one that defines it as the system of rules, implicit in a language, that all native speakers already possess perfectly in the form of grammatical competence. Against this, I wish to assert the continued usefulness of two older senses of the word. First, there is grammar as the system of describing a language, a needed way of talking about a given feature of a given piece of language, a useful tool in editing--and attaching punctuation to--what one has written. Second, there is grammar as literacy. This sense of the word has a long and honorable tradition; the grammar school was a school that existed for the purpose of imparting literacy. When laymen say something is "ungrammatical" or "bad grammar," they mean it's an illiteracy. Such illiteracies result from the failure to make grammatical and semantic distinctions the standard language insists on. When people say they learned their grammar in their foreign language courses, then, they mean they learned in our classes how to talk about and identify (and comprehend

the workings of) linguistic features and principles. What they also mean, but do not articulate, is that they acquired a significant portion of their literacy, their education in language, in the foreign language classroom. Both claims continue to be legitimate and valid, despite those who would invoke a popularized Chomskyism against them.

A second benefit traditionally claimed for foreign language study is the enhancement of vocabulary in the mother tongue. This claim, of course has long been made on behalf of Latin, but it is also valid to varying degrees for other languages, especially French and Spanish. The problem of vocabulary is particularly acute in a language such as English, with its Anglo-Saxon roots but derivatives constructed from the Latin or Greek equivalents of those roots: believe, but credulity. Together, these Latinisms and Hellenisms account for one of the two factors of syllable length and sentence length that enter into the standard formulas used to calculate the readability and grade level of a piece of writing. Without having researched the matter, I would surmise that there is a crucial but very limited band of Latinate vocabulary--consisting of perhaps only a few hundred roots and affixes--between the mother's-knee English that everyone knows and those uncommon, recondite words that only the most literate speakers know. Teachers of Latin and the Romance languages need to identify this fund of words and determine to what extent it is learned in the elementary and intermediate sequences respectively. To my knowledge, no one has done this.

In the modern foreign languages, one of the main linguistic operations at the elementary and intermediate levels is sentence manipulation. We practice substitution, thereby making structures transparent and demonstrating a basic principle of all language. We make simple transformations, we shift tenses, we transform from active to passive voice and back, we shift from direct to indirect discourse and from indicative to subjunctive. I would maintain, moreover, that in all these operations the same shifts and transformations are being made silently, if not explicitly, in the mother tongue. But aren't these operations so basic that all adolescents and young adults can perform them in their own language? The answer is no. A substantial percentage of freshman English students have a defective tense system and use the perfect tenses not at all or inappropriately. In the elaborated contexts of the written language, their command of indirect discourse is exceedingly shaky, and they have great difficulty with the tense- and person-shifting operations involved in paraphrasing. Also, the reason our students in elementary foreign languages have so much trouble making transformations from the active to the passive voice and back is because they probably have difficulty doing so in English. We foreign language teachers should accept the challenge of developing these sentence-manipulating skills in our students in their native tongue as well as in our respective target languages.

One of our hitherto unsung contributions to first-language literacy lies in the area of syntactic fluency, also called syntactic maturity. (Syntactic fluency is to be preferred because it implies that syntactic growth, unlike growth in physical stature, is neither preprogrammed nor inevitable.) Syntactic fluency can be defined as the ability of the writer to command a wide range of syntactic structures. The greater the facility for syntactic embedding and elaboration, where appropriate, the greater the syntactic fluency. The student who writes in a string of short, simple sentences can be said to be using immature syntax. For the past decade, a new technique has been appearing in English composition called sentence combining. Based on transformational grammar, sentence-combining exercises break down complex sentences into kernels and ask students to recombine them. In the following exercise of my own making, the kernels are somewhat longer than usual. The situation is the roll call at the 1980 Democratic convention:

1. The state of Delaware casts four votes for President Carter and ten votes for Senator Kennedy.
2. The state of Delaware will give the nation James Maxwell as our next congressman.

Combined: The state of Delaware, which will give the nation James Maxwell as our next congressman, casts four votes for president Carter and ten votes for Senator Kennedy.

Note that the sentence structure serves a definite rhetorical purpose: the delegation identifies itself in response to the roll call, the sentence is broken into before the announcement of the vote count in order to plug the state party's candidate, and the vote count is finally given, with the Kennedy supporter

at the microphone giving his candidate the applause line. The vehicle for achieving this purpose, a long nonrestrictive relative clause inserted between subject and verb, is rare in most student writing.

Such exercises are old hat to foreign language teachers. They have been a staple of our elementary textbooks for at least a quarter century. Exercises in subordinate clauses, relative clauses, and infinitive phrases are in fact exercises in embedding and sentence combining. Again, I would argue that such exercises in the target language are always silently transferred to English. I must insert a word of caution about sentence combining lest some composition teachers invoke their expertise and dampen your enthusiasm. The method is based on formalistic assumptions about writing, and the impressive showing of the method in many research studies has been described as good news for formalists. Such is the antiformalist animus in the composition profession, however, that sentence combining has always been resisted, and some formalists themselves, always a contentious breed, are beginning to pick away at it, much to the relief of the antiformalists who have resisted the method all along.

In recent years, translation into English has been a dirty word among foreign language teachers. Whatever its drawbacks as a means of teaching the target language, however, it has always been an excellent writing exercise in the native tongue and has been recognized as such since ancient and Renaissance times.

Cicero and Quintilian both claimed that their rhetorical skills benefited greatly from translating from Greek into Latin. In our times, even the most uninnovative college foreign language course taught through translation could generate around 200 words of translation for scrutiny per class hour, or 600 words a week. Most traditional composition teachers are able to read and comment on only about 500 words every two weeks, while process-oriented teachers, who work with multiple drafts, almost of necessity deal with fewer separate writing tasks.

Translation may lack some of the benefits of student-generated writing, but it boasts others that such writing lacks. Students must attempt to translate sentence for sentence, from initial capital to final period, thereby stretching their syntactic fluency. In self-generated writing, they can opt for short sentences and safe syntax. Translators must maintain fidelity to the original, thereby exercising the referential dimension of writing. Faced with contrasting features between the two languages, translators must create a translation that is idiomatic, thereby engaging their stylistic sense and grammatical competence. Semantically, they must find precise equivalents to the words in the original text, thereby increasing their vocabulary, their semantic fluency and precision, and their awareness of connotation and denotation. Translating the maxims of La Rochefoucauld

or the aphorisms of Nietzsche or Schopenhauer has an unmatched potential not only for intellectual stimulation, but for developing the stylistic sense as well. One could justify a place in the curriculum for a translation course with the explicit goal of teaching reading in the target language and writing in the native tongue.

One of the most important benefits and insights of foreign language study is gained in the very first hours of instruction: in the area of pronunciation. Literate people should have some sense of how to pronounce foreign words and proper names, and the sections on pronunciation at the beginning of our elementary textbooks can impart this sense for the target language and, by inference and extension, for other languages as well. It's King [hu'sein], Premier [naka'sone], former Premier [saito], the ['seiko] watch, and [Xomei'ni]. (The British practice of contriving to pronounce foreign proper names in a manner at variance with the original language should be rejected in favor of a system of attempting to approximate as closely as possible the original pronunciation. We should encourage pride in demonstrating a knowledge of foreign languages, not a perverse pride in being poor linguists.) When confronted with an unfamiliar word in one's own language, one should at least opt for one of several possibilities and come up with an equivalent number of syllables. Among today's youth, there is a disturbing tendency to produce some indistinguishable blob of sound, or, still worse, to balk completely before even

trying to pronounce a difficult word. The ability and willingness to grapple with the sound of any unfamiliar word is an important benefit our students can take from our classes.

As foreign language teachers know from their own lives, successful strategies for learning a foreign language can be transferred to learning one's native language. Especially at the intermediate level and beyond, the successful foreign language learner is consciously out to identify and soak up new words, new senses of known words, new rhetorical formulas. Those who can do this in their own language are in for lifelong growth in literacy.

We in the foreign language profession should do at least six things to assure greater persuasiveness for the proposition that second-language study contributes significantly to first-language growth:

1. We must rescue the proposition from its partial, pat, and more homespun formulations and give it a comprehensive and well-documented statement. Existing research should be analyzed and evaluated, gaps in our knowledge should be noted, and needed research should be encouraged and commissioned. The question should be defined to include cognitive growth in general as well as growth in the native language. This information should be brought together in a book-length collection and prominently published for broad dissemination to foreign language teachers in the field.

2. It is not enough for foreign language teachers to talk about first-language growth; we must take it into consideration in our methods and teaching strategies. In the audiolingual era, the profession was in the contradictory position of claiming benefits for first-language growth while adopting a teaching strategy that minimized this contribution by limiting the scope of instruction to mere language proficiency to the exclusion of all else.

3. We should find ways to document for our students our contribution to their linguistic knowledge and first-language skills. Typically, students have left our classes without being made to realize the extent to which they have been building and reinforcing these skills with us, and we have tended to dispense in passing many valuable insights into the phenomenon of language, but without holding our students responsible for them.

4. We should try to get a sense of the native-language proficiencies of our respective student populations and do what we can to improve them. Too often in the past, we have assumed that students came to us with backgrounds and first-language proficiencies they in fact lacked.

5. We should learn more about English grammar, stylistics, and composition so that we can talk about the subject with greater authority and self-assurance. Some of us should familiarize ourselves with English composition by volunteering to teach it.

6. Despite the unfavorable atmosphere outlined earlier, we should actively seek out dialogue with the linguistics and composition staffs at our respective institutions. In doing so, we should not be too much in awe of the expertise of our counterparts. The linguists are likely to be monolinguals working with monolingual models, while many Anglicists have had little or no formal training in the teaching of writing and are likely to be especially deficient in grammar, stylistics, and linguistics. We must insist that we know something about language too, and that our discipline has important insights to contribute. After all, for many centuries discourse education was the responsibility of the foreign language teacher. Shakespeare may have had small Latin and less Greek, but that was according to the formidable standards of the Renaissance. He had no English composition; the subject did not exist then. Nor did John Milton, that most oceanically literate of English poets. He did, however, know Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Italian.

The question of our contribution to the linguistic and cognitive growth of our students is crucial for all foreign language teachers. It involves nothing less than the standing and prestige of our discipline in the academy, the schools, the society at large.

Notes

¹College Entrance Examination Board, On Further Examination: Report of the Advisory Panel on the Scholastic Aptitude Test Score Decline (New York: CEEB, 1977), p. 27 et passim.

²By James L. Kinneavy and C. Robert Kline, Jr., in Teaching Composition: Ten Bibliographical Essays, ed. Gary Tate (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1977), pp. 241-273.

³Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer, Research in Written Composition (Urbana, IL: NCTE), pp. 37-38.

4. Martha Kolln, "Closing the Books on Alchemy," College Composition and Communication, 37 (1981), 138-150.