
The Professional Development of Foreign Language Instructors in Postsecondary Education

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Contents

Introduction	386
Early Developments	386
Major Contributions	389
Problems and Difficulties	392
Future Directions	393
Cross-References	394
Related Articles in the Encyclopedia of Language and Education	394
References	394

Abstract

This review traces developments in the preparation of foreign language instructors in postsecondary education from the post-World War II period to the present. It highlights the increasing systematization of TA professional development programs starting in the 1960s and the influence of proficiency standards and the emergence of the fields of second language acquisition and applied linguistics in the 1980s. The formalization of the role of the Language Program Director in the 1980s and the articulation of standards for this position are also discussed. The review also brings to light revised models of TA professional development in foreign language education proposed in the 1990s that are informed by applied linguistics, literacy, and other theoretical discourses. Trends in the late 1990s such as a focus on the professional development of lecturers are also discussed. The impact of the 2007 MLA report, *Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World*, and the implications of that report for TA professional development are featured. The review also discusses recent changes

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in TA professional development such as the emergence of certificates in foreign language teaching. Challenges in TA professional development, in particular the limitation of time devoted to professional development in the graduate curriculum and the resulting difficulty in incorporating the full range of theoretical discourses into TA professional development, are also discussed. Areas for future research, including an analysis of the current content of TA professional development courses and the impact of certificate programs on hiring are also presented.

Keywords

Professional development • TA • Preparation of foreign language instructors

Introduction

The teaching of foreign languages in postsecondary education is carried out by a heterogeneous group of instructors: tenure-track professors and graduate teaching assistants whose training is most frequently in literary and cultural studies and non-tenure-track instructors, often native speakers, with master's or Ph.D.'s in literature and cultural studies or linguistics. The initial professional development of these instructors takes place within the framework of graduate programs, when these instructors serve as teaching assistants and, in most cases, receive formal preparation in teaching undergraduate language courses. The ongoing professional development of these instructors once they have assumed faculty positions is usually left to the devices and initiative of the individual instructor. In isolated cases, ongoing professional development may be provided by a university-wide language center or through a centralized office of instructional development. Because of the foundational role played by teaching assistant professional development programs in the preparation of foreign language instructors, this review will focus primarily on research on graduate-level programs. Although to a lesser degree, the review will also address research on the professional development of language program directors, faculty who oversee the preparation of teaching assistants, and other faculty, in particular those in adjunct and non-tenure-track lecturer positions.

Early Developments

As Schulz (2000) and Hagiwara (1976) observe, publications on foreign language teacher education prior to the 1950s focused primarily on secondary school instructors. With the postwar increase in undergraduate enrollments as a result of the GI bill and the dramatic increase in foreign language enrollments brought on by the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) in 1958, foreign language departments at research universities began to rely almost exclusively on the use of teaching assistants to conduct introductory foreign language courses. This use of teaching assistants, most of whom were fresh out of college and had never taught before, thus

served as the catalyst for research and discussion about the formal preparation of postsecondary foreign language instructors.

Publications from the mid-1950s to the early 1980s on the professional development of postsecondary instructors focus primarily on the need to establish systematic preparation for teaching assistants and provide recommendations for doing so. In this period, a number of articles discussing best practices emerge in journals such as the *Modern Language Journal* (e.g., Remak 1957; Dalbor 1967; Azevedo 1976), *Foreign Language Annals* (e.g., Ervin and Muyskens 1982), the *ADFL Bulletin* (e.g., DiDonato 1983), and disciplinary journals such as the *French Review* (e.g., Gilbert and McArthur 1975).

Initial recommendations for providing teaching assistant preparation first appear in the 1955 Modern Language Association (MLA) conference report (PMLA 70.4, 1955). The report, based on five meetings of 18 foreign language department chairs, identifies a number of in-service teacher preparation activities already underway at several of the represented institutions, including methods courses, class visitation, general supervision, and collaboration in the preparation and grading of exams and calls for a formal certification program for foreign language graduate assistants that would consist of courses (e.g., in phonetics, applied linguistics, methods) and the passing of a nationally standardized exam that would be given under the auspices of the MLA.

From the early 1960s to the late 1970s, several major surveys of foreign language, doctorate-granting departments were undertaken to assess more systematically the status of graduate teaching assistant preparation and to provide recommendations. MacAllister's 1964 report (MacAllister 1964), based on a survey of foreign language departments undertaken by the MLA with support from the Carnegie Corporation and two subsequent conferences, revealed that almost 60% of the 52 responding departments (39 universities) provided no training whatsoever for their teaching assistants. Of those that did, preterm orientations, meetings with supervising faculty periodically throughout the semester, and classroom visits were the most common practices. Ten departments (approximately 20%) had semester-long courses on teaching foreign languages in college which were not, however, compulsory for graduate students who did not teach while pursuing their degree. The report compared the lack of systematic training for college-level teachers with the more substantial and methodical clinical preparation for doctors and called on the MLA to exert its influence with the 500 colleges it counted as members to improve the situation. The report identified qualities needed by language instructors and called for proficiency testing prior to the first assignment, a graduate-level course on methods in foreign language teaching and learning, and the establishment of summer institutes, similar to the NDEA institutes provided for secondary school teachers.

In 1969, another comprehensive survey of graduate programs in foreign languages was conducted by the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and the American Departments of Foreign Languages (ADFL). The findings of this report (Hagiwara 1970) indicated improvements since the 1964 MacAllister report, but much more work was still needed. The most prevalent activities included course-wide departmental final evaluations,

class visits by senior faculty, and regular meetings with old and new assistants. Approximately half of the departments provided demonstration classes, and half asked students to evaluate their teaching assistants. Though up from the 1964 MacAllister report, only 28% of the responding departments required a course in applied linguistics or methods. One of the most striking observations made by Hagiwara is the fact that a large majority of the supervisors of teaching assistants were in the rank of assistant professor or below, a sign he interprets as a devaluation of this activity. This topic will be picked up more substantially in publications during the 1980s.

In 1978–1979, two additional surveys were undertaken. Randomly sampling 90 universities, Nerenz et al. (1979) found that a full 91% of departments required a methods course of TAs. Another survey, conducted by Schulz (1980) who surveyed 370 foreign language, comparative literature, and linguistics departments representing 78 universities, showed less progress. (The discrepancy may have been due to the inclusion in Schulz's survey of linguistics and comparative literature departments, where TA preparation was established much later). Sixty-nine percent of the reporting departments offered preservice training, up from 38% in 1969, and almost 38% required a methods course, 10% more than the number offering required methods courses in Hagiwara's survey 10 years earlier. Twenty-eight percent of departments offered both preservice and in-service trainings as compared to 11% in Hagiwara's research. Schulz notes that student evaluation of TAs had risen substantially, but she also highlights the fact that none of the programs she surveyed required proficiency testing of TAs prior to the first appointment. Schulz provides a checklist of recommendations for TA development programs. A similar list of recommendations was provided by DiDonato (1983).

One last survey was undertaken by Gibaldi and Mirollo publications in 1981. While this MLA-funded report did not provide statistical summaries, it gives 17 recommendations for the teaching assistant apprenticeship and presents case studies of current programs. Perhaps most importantly, the report called upon departments to commit themselves to excellence in preparing college-level instructors.

In addition to presenting particular programs that prepare teaching assistants for their instructional roles, publications in the 1980s concentrate on the emerging role of the language program coordinator. As the need to prepare TAs for teaching became more accepted, greater attention was given to the role of the supervisor, his or her status in the department, and the background qualifications that the person brought to the position. Picking up on concerns raised by Hagiwara (1970), Schulz (1980) states: "Relatively few departments seem to recognize the need for specialized training as a prerequisite for the duties of TA trainer and supervisor" (p. 2). Several articles that appear in the 1980s point to this concern, calling for the establishment of standards in hiring language program coordinators. Lee (1987), for example, reports on a 1985 resolution by the Committee on Institutional Cooperation that articulates standards for language program coordinators. The MLA articulates standards for this position in the 1986 volume of *Profession*. Reflecting this increased focus on the professional development of language program

coordinators, in 1980 a professional organization is established, the American Association of University Supervisors, Coordinators, and Directors of Foreign Language Program (AAUSC), whose mission is to “promote, improve, and strengthen foreign language and second language instruction in the US; to strengthen development programs for teaching assistants, teaching fellows, associate instructors, or their equivalents; to promote research in second language acquisition and on the preparation and supervision of teaching assistants; and to establish a forum for exchanging ideas, experiences, and materials among those concerned with language program direction.” By the end of the 1980s this focus on the language program coordinator leads to the establishment of a journal devoted to the continued professional development of this group of individuals, *Issues in Language Program Direction*. The attention given to the language program coordinator dovetails with significant directions that begin to develop in the 1980s that have a profound effect both on the teaching of foreign languages and the preparation of instructors: the ACTFL proficiency standards and the reconceptualization of language learning through the fields of second language acquisition and applied linguistics. Articles published in the 1980s in the *ADFL Bulletin* (one entire volume devoted to standards, 1986) signal these new directions.

Major Contributions

Central publications on the professional development of language instructors appear in the AAUSC series, *Issues in Language Program Direction*. In addition to isolated articles scattered throughout a number of these volumes, the series devotes three issues (Walz 1992; Rifkin 2001; Allen and Maxim 2011) to this topic. Of note in the first volume of the series is an extensive bibliography by Benseler and Cronjaeger (1991) on teaching assistant development signaling that this topic has now become a formal area of research.

Publications that appear in the 1990s in this series and elsewhere reflect major shifts in the professional preparation of teaching assistants. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the new focus on standards and preparation for the assessment of proficiency is evidenced by articles such as Murphy (1991) and the publication in 1993 of Omaggio’s *Teaching Language in Context: Proficiency Oriented Instruction*, a book that would become one of the standard texts in methods courses for teaching assistants at many universities in the 1990s. A second shift evidenced by the research in the 1990s picks up on concerns raised earlier by Hagiwara (1976) and calls on departments to move from the preparation of teaching assistants for the immediate instructional needs of the institution to the education and professional development of graduate students as future faculty (e.g., Azevedo 1990; Pons 1993; Chaput 2001). This trend resonates with and is influenced by similar shifts in the field of TA development in higher education in general in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Nyquist et al. 1991) and the emergence of Preparing Future Faculty programs at many research universities through funding from the American Association of Universities and Colleges (AAUSC) and the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS)

and later by the Pew Charitable Trusts. In addition to emphasizing this longer range view of professional development, research on TA development in the 1990s reveals a shift from a view of teaching as the application of methods to one that is predicated on reflective practice and classroom research (e.g., Wildner-Bassett 1992; Kinginger 1995; Dhawan 2001; McDonough 2006). These directions are influenced by the work of Schön (1983) on the reflective practitioner and that of Allright, Crookes, and others on action research. This movement beyond training and methods at all levels of foreign language teacher education is summed up by representative titles from this decade: *Training Foreign Language Teachers: A Reflective Approach* (Wallace 1991) and *Beyond Training* (Richards 1998). In the 1990s, the full maturation of the fields of applied linguistics and second language acquisition theory, the shift in foreign language departments from an exclusive focus on literature to one that included cultural studies, and the impact of poststructuralist theory on the humanities lead to publications that begin to challenge current, instrumental approaches to foreign language study (e.g., Kramsch 1995) and teaching assistant preparation. Fox (1992) and Rankin (1994) call for a revised model of TA training that will incorporate applied linguistics. Von Hoene (1995) uses feminist, postcolonial, and psychoanalytic theory to rethink the preparation of graduate students for teaching and makes recommendations to break down the rigid divide (noted by many authors in the AAUSC series and elsewhere) that exists in foreign language departments between the study of language on the one hand and the study of literature on the other. Building on work done by Kramsch and Nolden (1994), Kern (1995) encourages the incorporation of literacy in the preparation of teaching assistants to enable them to guide students in developing critical literacy in a foreign language.

One early application of a literacy approach to foreign language acquisition (Byrnes 2001) was undertaken in the German department at Georgetown University where the undergraduate curriculum was substantially revised through the lens of narrativity and genre. These revisions led to significant changes in the manner in which teaching assistants were prepared for teaching and the broader involvement of faculty in the professional development of graduate students. By rethinking the divide between language and literature through the concept of literacy, the responsibility for teaching assistant preparation is distributed among all faculty in the department. The language program coordinator in this model becomes less isolated, and the link between language and literature is once again restored.

In the late 1990s, research begins to appear on the professional development of lecturers (Van Deusen-Scholl et al. 1999; von Hoene and Van Deusen-Scholl 2001; Bernhardt 2001a; Robin 2001). While the increased use of lecturers and adjunct faculty in higher education reflects a structural change in university staffing over the last several decades and is not limited to foreign language departments, the percentage of lecturers at any one university is often concentrated in the teaching of languages. This is particularly true of the so-called less commonly taught languages (LCTLs) and at colleges and universities that do not offer Ph.D. programs. Van Deusen-Scholl et al. (1999) report on research on the professional development needs of lecturers at a major research university. Following up on this work, von Hoene and Van Deusen-Scholl (2001) call into question models of lecturer

“professionalization” which are often steeped in a colonialist, top-down discourse. They describe an alternate model developed at UC Berkeley that draws on the input of lecturers and provides support for their ongoing professional development. Bernhardt (2001a) points to two generations of lecturers, one trained in second language acquisition theory and applied linguistics and an older generation whose teaching does not benefit from these more recent developments. Robin (2001) describes many of the difficulties involved in providing professional development support to adjuncts who often teach on more than one campus and may lack the time and incentive for ongoing professional development activities.

The publication in 2007 of the MLA report, *Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World*, constitutes a threshold moment for research on graduate student professional development primarily due to the almost complete absence of this topic in such an important report. This oversight, not lost on those involved in graduate student professional development (Pfeiffer 2008; Schechtman and Koser 2008), provides the impetus for Allen and Negueruela-Azarola’s (2010) comprehensive overview of the research on graduate student professional development from 1987 to 2008 and the subsequent 2011 AAUSC volume, *Educating the Future professoriate for the 21st Century* (Allen and Maxim 2011). The central question the 2011 volume attempts to address is how to prepare future faculty for the very changes called for in the 2007 MLA report, in particular a movement from an instrumental approach to language learning to one whose goal is “translingual and transcultural competence” within a “coherent curriculum in which language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole” (MLA 2007).

While the MLA report was forward looking, it benefited greatly from research and recommendations from the decades leading up to its publication report. For example, Kramsch’s (1993) concept of a “third space” anticipates the translinguistic and transcultural position of the language learner in the MLA report; Kern’s (1995, 2000) and Byrnes (2001) focus on literacy address ways to overcome the bifurcated nature of foreign language departments. Other publications prior to the MLA report also focus on the need to incorporate such things as the teaching of culture (Arens 1991), literature (Bernhardt 2001b; Pfeiffer 2002; Barnes-Karol 2003), and broader theoretical discourses such as feminist and postcolonial theory (von Hoene 1995, 1999) into the preparation of graduate students for teaching.

The articles that appear in the 2011 AAUSC volume, *Educating the Future Foreign Language Professoriate for the 21st Century* (Allen and Maxim 2011), highlight programs, mainly in their infancy, that draw on this earlier research and incorporate it into a rethinking of graduate student professional development. Kern (2011) and Paesani (2011) advocate for a literacy-based approach in which TAs are prepared to assist students in developing a critical understanding of cultures through the analysis and interpretation of texts. Reeser (2011) demonstrates how teaching graduate students how to teach texts can be incorporated into graduate literature and culture seminars. Rather than limiting professional development to one course – a change called for since the early 1990s (Lalande 1991) – this program provides a professional development model that could be used by faculty members teaching any graduate-level course. Blyth (2011) reports on a course on cultural linguistics

that also enables graduate students to rethink their approach to language and culture called for in the MLA report.

More recent research confirms a slightly heightened attention to graduate student professional development in the form of courses on topics such as teaching film (Sturm 2012), teaching and technology, and language program director development (Enkin 2015). The emergence of certificates in foreign language teaching and second language acquisition (e.g., at Yale, Michigan State, Maryland, and University of Washington) that augment offerings in the Ph.D. program and prepare graduate students specifically for the teaching of foreign languages is another indicator of this change.

Problems and Difficulties

While most departments require one semester of teacher training, the content of these courses in general has not kept up with the most recent research in applied linguistics. As a result, research is outpacing practice. If one looks at syllabi of courses for graduate student instructors on how to teach foreign languages, one finds a primary if not exclusive focus on communicative competence. In some cases, supplemental texts are added on topics ranging from teaching literature, culture, and the use of technology. Two major challenges can be seen. First, how to get language program directors to incorporate into these courses research consistent with the development of the competencies called for in the MLA report. Second, given that this cannot be taught in one semester, how can additional seminar time be devoted to professional development that would produce these outcomes? Though some of the more commonly taught languages have a two-semester series, the standard practice at most research universities remains one methods course (Allen and Negueruela-Azarola 2010). While some exceptions to this rule can be seen (e.g., courses on the teaching of film, literature, literacy, or program direction), these are exceptions rather than the norm.

Second, the professional development of graduate students is not a shared enterprise in most departments, and language program directors are often not viewed as core faculty. While the Georgetown model is a touchstone and example of transformations that may be possible, few departments have made similarly substantive changes that would bridge the language/literature divide. In other words, approaches involving team teaching (Schechtman and Koser 2008) or the incorporation of pedagogical approaches in graduate seminars (Reeser 2011), though feasible and in the latter case highly replicable, have not taken root eight years out from the MLA report.

Given the narrowing of the job market for Ph.D.s in foreign language departments, departments will also need to consider their roles in preparing graduate students for expanded career paths beyond the academy, echoing Wurst (2008) who discusses the development of skills through a Ph.D. program that may be transferable to other career paths as well.

Professional development programs for non-tenure-track faculty, though receiving greater attention through the development of language centers on a number of campuses (e.g., Berkeley, Stanford, Yale, Pennsylvania, etc.), are still quite limited. Given the structural shift in higher education to a more temporary, adjunct workforce, a cohesive approach to the professional development of adjunct faculty has become increasingly important. As Robin (2001) and Bernhardt (2001a) note, many lecturers currently teaching languages in higher education have either outmoded training or no training at all in second language acquisition theory and applied linguistics. As a result, language programs vary widely in the degree to which they are informed by the most recent research findings in these fields.

Future Directions

1. A comprehensive research study should be conducted of syllabi for courses that prepare graduate students for teaching foreign languages, literatures, and cultures. Publication of the results would enable a broader understanding of the status of graduate student professional development and would lay bare the gaps that may exist between current practice and the development of the competencies advocated by the MLA report. Research on how well these courses prepare graduate students to teach heritage students and less commonly taught languages should also be included in this study.
2. Best practices such as those installed at Georgetown and in the courses developed by Reeser (2011) and Paesani (2011) should be shared widely. The MLA could convene workshops for ladder-rank faculty and department chairs on getting more faculty involved in the professional development of graduate students so that departments understand their role in teaching graduate students how to operate between languages and cultures and how to teach their students to do the same.
3. Research needs to be conducted on the emergence of graduate certificates in second and foreign language teaching. As the academic job market narrows in foreign language and literature departments, are these certificate programs assisting graduate students in securing positions? To what extent do these programs focus on second language acquisition and teaching methods rather than the broader field of applied linguistics that may be essential in preparing graduate students for teaching for translanguingual and transcultural competence?
4. More research needs to be conducted on the degree to which the preparation graduate students receive in teaching fits the needs of their future careers. Research of this sort would give a basis upon which to make recommendations for courses on the graduate level in areas such as cross-cultural literacy, stylistics, language and identity, language and power, and semiotics. Most colleges and universities have a centralized unit that provides professional development for faculty. Research is needed on how these units currently support the professional development of instructors in foreign languages and how these units can work together to supplement each other's work.

5. While some progress has been made in increasing the applied linguistics training of language program coordinators, many still need to develop this expertise. Release time and other incentives should be granted for lecturers to acquire the knowledge base needed to teach students how to develop translanguing and transcultural competence. Ideas might include reading groups, lecture series, and research grants as provided, for example, by the Berkeley Language Center. Research on the impact of these activities on the professional development of lecturers should be pursued.

Cross-References

- [Applied Linguistic Theory and Second/Foreign Language Education](#)

Related Articles in the Encyclopedia of Language and Education

- Ofelia Garcia: [Multilingual Language Awareness and Teacher Education](#). In Volume: Language Awareness and Multilingualism
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