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## **Rethinking the value and nature of Advanced Composition and Grammar courses in Foreign Languages**

### ***Nature and Goals of Project and Its Implications for Students:***

I am applying for a CATL Scholars fellowship to restructure the Advanced Spanish Composition and Grammar course according to the innovative teaching techniques of engaged and individualized teaching and learning. This is one of the courses I teach on a regular basis at Elon and one that is required for our majors and minors. Based on my experience of teaching the course, as well as the conversations with my colleagues who have taught it, I believe that using engaged learning techniques in combination with an individualized approach to teaching in this course will result in a considerable improvement in students learning outcomes.

The pedagogy that I would like to implement in the course will:

- A. Offer students individual guidance and attention that would allow them to start learning at the level of their present knowledge and advance at their pace.  
Students enrolled in the course come with a wide range of language proficiency. Some have had 2 years of language instruction, some up to 5 and some are native or near-native speakers. Hence, the type of support they require, especially when learning to become better writers in a foreign language, is highly individualized. While all of them face certain challenges when it comes to grammar, syntax and formal expression, they should be given a type of in and out of the classroom support that is adapted to their particular strengths and weaknesses.
- B. Expose students to the content that addresses several meaningful and relevant social, political, literary, and cultural issues and presents them from different angles, through a wide variety of discourses. Students will be able to view the problems that our society faces not from one, but many different perspectives and be exposed to the texts written not only by literary, but also political authors, journalists, business people, and so on.

- C. Recognize "engaged learning" as a core of the course' structure and content. I am using the term "engaged" to address the need for the course components and materials to be developed as a continuum, rather than separate and/or parallel with each other. The goal will be for the texts on certain topics to lead to the discussion of particular grammatical and syntactic structures; the writing produced by the student to reflect their progress in terms of their familiarity with the content and the form being taught; the activities that guide students through the process to incorporate formal exercise of grammatical/syntactic structures with the practical application of them in a meaningful context.

### ***How is my project creative and transformative?***

The project will address two extremely relevant problems that foreign language curriculum faces not only at Elon but around the US: First, the lack of scholarly research related to the foreign language instruction at advanced level; and second, the lack of textbooks for this type of course that would promote communicative and engaged learning.

### ***Research and Scholarship***

Although, there is a wide range of scholarly research conducted on foreign language pedagogy in the US and around the world, in most cases the discussion revolves around communicative language teaching model and the incorporation of culture in our curricula. As the most recent MLA Report pointed out, our approach to foreign language curriculum has been two-tiered (language-literature), and as such has exhausted itself as nonfunctional and ineffective.<sup>1</sup> While elementary and intermediate language courses tend to focus mostly on form (grammar, vocabulary) and incorporate culture as an afterthought, upper level courses focus primarily on content (cultural and literary) while avoiding grammar and formal expression altogether assuming that students have already mastered them. The period in between is, in fact, extremely painful for students and requires a considerable amount of time and practice. It is the period when students start to abandon basic and simple structures and start experimenting with the

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<sup>1</sup> "Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World." MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages. May 2007. < <http://www.mla.org/flreport> >. The Committee suggested "[r]eplacing two-tiered language-literature structure with a broader and more coherent curriculum in which language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole.

complexity and messiness of language; and, as a consequence, the process seems lengthy to them and sometimes even gives them an impression of moving backwards instead of progressing forward. I view this "in-between" period as a threshold or gateway that either engages students and promotes life-long dedication to foreign language or frustrates and discourages them.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, there is a vacuum of research and materials available to the instructors who teach such courses. There is a great need to confront this issue and to promote scholarly research on foreign language pedagogy at an advanced level.

The materials created for the class, the research accompanying the project and the results obtained should provide valuable information to anyone teaching not only composition and grammar courses in foreign language, but upper level literature and culture courses as well. It will also be a big step towards filling in the vacuum that exists in the scholarship on teaching and learning foreign languages at this level. Hence, there will be many opportunities for public dissemination of the goals and outcomes of the project. Besides the opportunity to publish the results in discipline specific journals and /or conferences, the materials gathered for the project and used in classroom will be developed as a textbook.

### ***Teaching***

Textbooks available for teaching composition and writing at an advanced level of language proficiency do not consider the reality that the instructors face in the classroom. These textbooks offer grammatical instruction that is based on drills and repetition of form, an instruction that does not take into consideration various levels of students' linguistic proficiency, and as such, they do not lend themselves to an individualized instruction.

Furthermore, the vast majority of available textbooks are literature based. While I certainly appreciate the value of the literary texts, I would argue that students will benefit more if they were to read about the very same topics from different perspectives, written with a diverse audience in mind and with diverse objectives. Comparing the purpose of these texts and their

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<sup>2</sup> See Meyer, J.H.F. and Land, R. Overcoming Barriers to Student Understanding: threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge. London and NewYork: Routledge, 2006. I am using Meyer and Land's definition of crossing the "threshold " who view the process as irreversible, transformative, troublesome for its non-intuitive and alien character, and liminal as it involves crossing boundaries of easy and difficult and constant negotiation of meaning.

intended audience will provide a rich material for class discussions and foster student engagement.

Furthermore, the available textbooks divide the material presented in them in grammatical topics, vocabulary practice and textual analysis as separate from each other rather than integrating them as parts of the whole. As a rule, a grammatical topic introduced in one chapter with its accompanying exercises has nothing in common with the content of the text that students read in this very chapter. The activities to practice grammar, vocabulary and syntax are autonomous from the reading and writing content of the chapters; hence do not engage students in conversation and do not require them to be in charge of their learning. The exams too, if provided by the textbook authors, promote memorization and drilling rather than active learning from students. When faced with a pedagogy based on the "engaged learning technique", students feel bewildered. If the course structure and content do not promote student engagement on each step and with every activity, incorporating them into a typical classroom that makes use of a traditional textbook seems random and pointless to students.

Consequently, the experimental course that I will teach will:

- Offer students an individualized guidance in grammar and formal expression. Students' knowledge will be evaluated during the first weeks of the semester and they will be provided with a set of activities that will address their specific needs. The activities will be adjusted throughout the semester to guide students' progress in the classroom.
- Offer students an opportunity to choose from a variety of social, political and cultural issues at the beginning of the semester. Once the choice is made, each topic selected will have a list of texts/visual materials taken from different disciplines (film, literature, magazine/newspaper article, legal document, etc.). Hence, students will be looking at one issue from various perspectives developing awareness towards discursive elements of each perspective.
- Be guided by recognition of "engaged learning" as the best practice in today's academic environment. All, and not just some, activities of the classroom will promote students' active engagement with their learning process through frequent role-plays, case studies,

problem solving, pair and group work, as well as students' active involvement in the design and structure of the course itself.

### ***Teaching and Learning Evidence and Effectiveness***

One of my goals will be to devise studies with the help of CATL that would help me evaluate student learning outcomes. I also plan to provide evidence of effectiveness in the following ways:

- a. I will gather survey data from students at the beginning of the course that will allow me to look at students' expectations and goals for the course and their understanding of the process of language acquisition.
- b. I will conduct initial writing activities that will help me understand students' strengths and weaknesses. The survey and the initial writing exercises will help me develop individual goals for students as well as those that can be common for the class.
- c. Throughout the duration of the course, students and I will keep track of their progress by frequent assessment of their writing that will come from me as well as from them.
- d. I will also use ACTFL guidelines of learning goals for upper intermediate learners as well as the goals set forth by the Department of Foreign Languages at Elon to evaluate my students' performance at the end of the course.

### ***Proposed Timeline and Budget:***

I have taught SPN 322: Advanced Composition and Grammar course several times during the past three and a half years and have developed materials that resonated with my philosophy of teaching foreign language. As a CALT scholar I will dedicate my time to a significant restructuring of the course, to the gathering of additional materials that will align with my pedagogy, and to designing measures to evaluate course outcomes and students' performance.

Fall semester of 2011 will be used to design the structure of the course, prepare rudimentary teaching materials, and to obtain IRB approval to use student feedback through survey(s) and evaluations of their learning process and their experience in the course. During this

semester I will be collaborating with CATL on developing studies that would assist me in evaluating students' learning outcomes.

Spring semester of 2012: I will teach the course using an innovative learner-centered pedagogy and individualized approach to learning. I will collect the data through survey(s), student feedback and evaluations, and student outcomes.

Fall and Spring semesters of 2012-13: I will analyze the results looking at students' learning outcomes, as well as their feedback related to the course content and the pedagogy. This time will also be used to study the effectiveness of the pedagogy and revise materials for future use. I will "go public" with the results through participation in conferences (my goal will be to present at The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages Annual Convention) and publication of the study.

Furthermore, I will work on the possibility of publishing a textbook based on the results of my research, student feedback and learning outcomes, as well as the materials gathered for the course.

In terms of budgetary requests, I am requesting funds for travel and materials (audio, video, texts/documents) that will be useful for the course. The travel budget will allow me to participate in SoTL conference(s) in order to share my pedagogy and the outcomes with others working in the field. From my personal experience, one of the most highly valued presentations at such conferences are those that give teachers practical ideas and materials for their classrooms. I hope to be able to provide such support as a result of the implementation of the project. I will share my pedagogy and the activities designed specifically with engaged and individualized learning in mind, as well as the global outcome of the project and its implications within the field of foreign language teaching.

The remaining budget will be used to purchase books (that incorporate literary and non-literary texts), videos, and other materials to review for use in the course, as well as subscription to Spanish language journals and magazines to incorporate readings and discussion topics relevant to contemporary life.