Literature across the Curriculum: One View of Spanish from an Undergraduate Liberal Arts Perspective

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“I LOVE to read books, but I hate to read literature!” These words, spoken to me by a student in one of the first introductions to literature courses I taught in the early 1980s, have haunted me ever since. What does it mean to love reading books but to hate literature? Wouldn’t a student who loves to read be in heaven in a literature class where one does nothing but read not only books but great books? Some twenty years later, I am still not sure that I fully understand this comment, one I have heard echoed in many variations by students at each of the four institutions where I have taught. Yet such dislike or fear of literature in a foreign language curriculum is not unique to my students. In a recent article describing a Spanish bridge course based on reading strategies taught at a large midwestern university, Carmen Chaves Tesser and Donna Reseigh Long relate the abrupt change in students’ attitudes and reading behaviors when, in the fifth week of the quarter, they were given a literary text and asked to read it as such. The students, who had in previous weeks successfully demonstrated a variety of reading strategies when reading literary passages not explicitly identified as such, reverted to strategies that impeded their ability to comprehend and work with the text when faced with something described as literature. Anticipating not being able to understand literature, they became frustrated. Thinking that they needed to know what every word of the text meant, they turned to dictionaries and returned to word-for-word translation (608–09).

Over the years, I have come to believe that students’ perceived aversion to literature is a reflection not only of what we ask them to read in the courses we teach but, more important, of how and why we ask them to read. More specifically, comments such as the one above contrast how we as professional readers read with how our undergraduate students read in a foreign language. Whereas we read as experts, grounded in a particular theoretical framework and drawing from a rich understanding of the linguistic and cultural contexts in which texts are produced, our students read as readers in training. Some of them who understand the individual words on a page may have to struggle to make sense out of written discourse at the sentence or paragraph level. Moreover, given their still developing skills in the target language and their limited knowledge of the cultural underpinnings of a literary work, just understanding the nuances of plot and character development may be a genuine accomplishment. In short, for many of our undergraduate students, reading any text, literary or not, is truly a work in progress. Their motivations may differ greatly from ours, also. While we teachers often read to analyze connections between theory and text, our students often read simply because that’s what we’ve assigned them to do for the next class period.

Because we teach foreign languages to undergraduates today in a context colored by, to use Sander L. Gilman’s words, “two perceptions of language, as a special knowledge that ennobles and a pragmatic tool” (1033), it behooves us to take this context into consideration when we look at why, how, and what we teach with regard to literature in the undergraduate curriculum. In this essay, I posit a model that increases the space devoted to literature in the undergraduate foreign language curriculum, in what I refer to as a “literature across the curriculum” approach. Proposing that students read more literature at all levels of the curriculum, I also advocate that they read literature in a multiplicity of ways, with goals that vary according to the level of instruction, the nature of particular courses, and overall departmental or institutional curricular objectives.

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Why Read Literature Anyway?

Why should we ask students to read literature in the first place? This question is inextricably linked to a larger one: Why does the undergraduate foreign language major or department exist at all in today's world? As Gilman asks, is it primarily to prepare future graduate students or to serve the needs of nonmajors (1035)? Is literature an essential part of an institution's international mission? Do undergraduates pursue a language major to train to become future teachers or professors; to realize other, more “utilitarian,” goals like becoming bilingual social workers; or because “their interests are broad and because they understand that the study of languages other than their own will provide different access to their intellectual or professional interests” (1037)? The answers to such questions must frame our view of literature and its place in the undergraduate curriculum.

If such questions are pertinent to all foreign language learners in our country, those of us teaching Spanish at the undergraduate level in the United States face a unique situation because of Spanish's emerging position as the country's second language. As enrollments in Spanish across the nation have skyrocketed in recent years, students of Spanish have become more diverse in their backgrounds, learning styles and preferences, and career goals. While we still have students who are drawn to Spanish as a humanistic endeavor, especially at undergraduate liberal arts institutions, most of the students at my institution who pursue advanced studies in Spanish are instrumentally motivated: they see Spanish as a second major and thus as an adjunct to another field of study or profession rather than as a worthy pursuit in itself. Some students view reading literature as irrelevant to their future careers as bilingual health care professionals, international managers, attorneys, and so on, unless perhaps they are asked to read late-twentieth-century works. They see time spent reading literature as time robbed from more practical courses with an immediate application to their life beyond graduation—conversation courses, advanced grammar, and Spanish for special purposes (e.g., business Spanish or Spanish for health care providers). While students' vocational plans should not drive college curricula, I believe that we would do well to evaluate and develop courses that encompass the ability to carefully analyze an event, a maturation. According to Graff, Rose's critical literacy with my concerns for our students' overall intellectual development of what Mike Rose refers to as "critical literacy" resonate with my concerns for our students' overall intellectual maturation. According to Graff, Rose's critical literacy encompasses the ability to carefully analyze an event, a problem, or a text; synthesize multiple, even conflicting, viewpoints; and outline or dissect arguments (91). Thus, reading books—reading literature—and wrestling with the questions that emerge from words on a page, from our interactions with these words, and from our contact with the reactions of others who have read the same words as parts of a “critical community of readers” (75) would appear to lie at the heart of what our curriculum should prepare liberal arts students to be able to do beyond graduation. Graff's emphasis on reading as a “social activity” seems particularly apt for reading in the foreign language classroom: “reading books with comprehension, making arguments, writing papers, and making comments in a class discussion are social activities. They involve entering into a cultural or disciplinary conversation, a process not unlike initiation into a social club” (77). But entering effectively into this conversation of readers linked to a perspective across the curriculum and the notion that we are preparing students to be lifelong learners instead of merely providing them with the tools for a livelihood (see "Mission"). With this mission in mind, our department has discussed the role of the Spanish major in terms of forming broadly educated and analytically minded people capable of responsible citizenship in a global society. In reference to our institution's emphasis on a global perspective, we have found enlightening Martha C. Nussbaum's concept of the development of a “narrative imagination” through the reading and analysis of literature that allows students to see the world from another point of view in a way that mere factual knowledge cannot (see Justice and Cultivating). Nussbaum proposes that reading literature (canonical and noncanonical works alike) both “sympathetically” and “critically” can be transformational for students in their intellectual and civic development. She sees the cultivation of a narrative imagination as a prerequisite for moral interaction in society, for without insights into what other peoples' lives are or could be it is difficult to acquire the type of empathy that promotes social justice (Cultivating 90–92). As she asserts, ‘A society that wants to foster the just treatment of all its members has strong reasons to foster an exercise of the compassionate imagination that crosses social boundaries, or tries to. And this means caring about literature” (92). But compassion or sympathy is insufficient if one does not critically question the issues that works of literature raise; empathy must be accompanied by and informed by analysis, dialogue, and critique (100).

The need for reasoned engagement with a text as part of cultivating the narrative imagination necessary for citizenship in a global world leads also to forming students to become lifelong learners. I have found that many of Gerald Graff’s concerns regarding students’ development of what Mike Rose refers to as “critical literacy” resonate with my concerns for our students' overall intellectual maturation. According to Graff, Rose's critical literacy encompasses the ability to carefully analyze an event, a problem, or a text; synthesize multiple, even conflicting, viewpoints; and outline or dissect arguments (91). Thus, reading books—reading literature—and wrestling with the questions that emerge from words on a page, from our interactions with these words, and from our contact with the reactions of others who have read the same words as parts of a “critical community of readers” (75) would appear to lie at the heart of what our curriculum should prepare liberal arts students to be able to do beyond graduation. Graff's emphasis on reading as a “social activity” seems particularly apt for reading in the foreign language classroom: “reading books with comprehension, making arguments, writing papers, and making comments in a class discussion are social activities. They involve entering into a cultural or disciplinary conversation, a process not unlike initiation into a social club” (77). But entering effectively into this conversation of readers linked to a
larger reading community in another language must be skillfully mediated by teachers attuned to students’ linguistic, cultural, and cognitive readiness.

Byrnes characterizes the nonnative reader of a literary text as not “belong[ing] to the discourse community in which the native text was produced and for which it was intended” (“Constructing” 279). She suggests that as we design curricula, we take into consideration the special needs of the nonnative reader of literature by adopting a “multiple literacies” framework, in which literacy in the reader’s native language is conceived to be concurrent with literacy in the reader’s foreign language (278–80) although, of course, probably not equal in depth or breadth. This concept of multiple literacies encourages us to see our students as language learners in “diverse discourse communities” and to prepare them to be able to “negotiate a multiplicity of text forms and discourses in a number of cultures” as future citizens in a global world (278). Extending further the idea of students as members of special critical or discourse communities of nonnative readers in dialogue with one another and with native readers, I find Virginia Scott’s comments on language learners as part of communities to be particularly illuminating. As she states, “Vygotskyan theories have led many researchers in SLA to consider that second language development proceeds from the community of learners into the mind of the individual [. . .] rather than proceeding outward from the mind of the individual toward the community of learners” (539). Acceptance of this notion must inform not only why we ask students to read literature but also how.

These interconnected views on the value of reading literature in multiple ways have served as points of departure for my theoretical reevaluation of why my undergraduate Spanish students should read literature. In addition, my classroom experiences have sharpened my ideas about why we should teach more literature in undergraduate Spanish programs. First, teaching in a content-based intermediate Spanish program that focuses on the reading and analysis of authentic texts on contemporary cultural issues has helped train me to merge language instruction with an emphasis on content appropriate intellectually for college students. Second, my participation in Saint Olaf’s Foreign Languages across the Curriculum Program has allowed me to see students who would be paralyzed with fear when faced with literature blossom when analyzing Spanish-language primary documents as sophisticated as the literary texts I use. Third, I have discovered to my dismay that I have largely ignored the possibility of using literary texts in new contexts—that is, outside the designated literature courses in our major program. In my previous nonliterature courses, for example, I had worked to enrich the factual knowledge that my students learned about the Spanish language and the cultures of the Spanish-speaking world through a variety of primary texts, but I had not enhanced their understanding of that world either by appealing to their narrative imagination or by helping them enter a discourse community. As a result, I have come to believe that, just as we have endeavored to bring a vast array of authentic nonliterary texts into Spanish curricula at all levels, we must now do the same with literary texts. Literature belongs across the curriculum in Spanish programs as surely as continued language acquisition itself does.

How Should Literature Be Read in and beyond the Literature Class?

Integrating literature across the curriculum means that we must be willing to use literature in new ways. These new ways do not emerge primarily from debates on whether we use a feminist, semiotic, or other kind of theoretical approach. Rather, they involve reading literature to achieve goals that are not limited to the literary. Such readings might mean building on Doris Kadish’s concept of “applied literature”: “literature taught as a means rather than an end in itself” (51). Or innovative approaches might link literature to continued language acquisition or to the expression of both personal and more scholarly reactions to literary texts in creative, student-friendly, yet academically challenging ways (see, e.g., Barnes-Karol; Krueger; Tucker). The cultivation of a narrative imagination might involve a type of reading that highlights both the cultural interconnectedness of human beings and the very culture-specific circumstances that mark us as individuals living in a particular society as we, in turn, shape our distinct cultural contexts. Assisting students to enter a critical community of readers suggests the need to structure reading activities that will provide them with frequent opportunities to analyze, construct, deconstruct, defend, discard, support, or question arguments through speaking and writing tasks in which they—and not just the teacher—are active participants. Such activities would give special attention to the connections between students’ differing English- and Spanish-language literacies and the opportunities that working with literary texts present for continued language learning at the advanced level.

The models described by Katherine Arens and Janet Swaffar in “Reading Goals and the Standards for Foreign Language Learning” are particularly useful to us as we imagine concrete ways to teach literary texts across the curriculum in a liberal arts institution. Following the five categories of the Standards—communication, connection, culture, comparison, and communities—Arens and Swaffar characterize five clusters of interconnected reading goals that, singly or in combination, can serve as the focus for instruction (see 104–19 for complete descriptions):

- readings for communication: readers read to understand information offered by a text and to communicate that information and their responses through speaking or writing
Goals such as these can help us envision how literature might be distributed across the curriculum in an undergraduate liberal arts Spanish program. Can we use (short) literary texts at the first- and second-year levels of instruction to show how they deal with a topic in ways that non-literary texts do not? Can we communicate information about these texts actively in speaking and writing? And, when fitting, can we highlight their cultural context? If so, we will most likely conclude that using literature at this level necessitates creating supplemental materials, as the treatment of literature in linguistically appropriate and cognitively challenging ways is uneven in commercial Spanish textbooks. At the upper level of the Spanish curriculum, which is dominated by literature courses, how can we modify existing courses or create new ones that acknowledge the reality that our students are readers in training? Once we choose texts (the kind that compel students to wrestle actively with the questions they provoke), how can we structure the readings of them to entice students into exploring facets of the works, the target culture, their own culture, and themselves? How can the reading challenge their minds without leading them to linguistic or cognitive breakdown or shutdown?

At the advanced-intermediate or beginning major level, can we imagine ways to incorporate carefully selected works of literature into courses that are not literature courses to enhance course content or provide a new perspective on skill development? For instance, could the reading of a contemporary play enrich a Spanish conversation class? Could a play give students models of speech acts and new insights into the power of words in human interactions? Could analysis of dialogue help them visualize more clearly the similarities or differences between written and more oral types of discourse (keeping in mind, of course, that theatrical dialogue is not the reproduction of authentic spoken language)? Could reading literature enhance the many culture courses that often serve as transition from the language sequence to literature courses in undergraduate liberal arts Spanish programs?

This last question motivated a colleague and me to undertake linked curricular experiments in two sequential culture and civilization courses in the Spanish program at Saint Olaf College in the fall of 2000.4 Inspired by Nussbaum and by Arens and Swaffar in particular, I revamped the Culture and Civilization of Spain course I frequently teach by including a novel. This fifth-semester Spanish course is one of those catchall courses with a heavy content load: Spain from the caves at Altamira to current-day social issues such as illegal immigration and women's rights. In the past, the core text for the course was a conventional Spanish-language culture-civilization textbook (Quesada Marco). Using the textbook primarily as background material to understand the context of major historical periods, we read and analyzed an eclectic series of short authentic texts, in a model inspired by our foreign languages across the curriculum program.5 Some of these have been nonliterary primary documents from a variety of genres, ranging from medieval fueros (local charters or statutes) to the Constitución española de 1978 with regard to law (“Constitución”), or, with regard to language use, from the introduction of Antonio de Nebrija’s Gramática, which gave Castilian the role of the language of the Spanish empire, to hot-off-the-press articles about language policy in a multilingual Spain from the digital versions of major Spanish newspapers. Other authentic texts have been excerpts from selected literary works: a segment of the Poema de mio Cid (Poem), for example; a scene from Lope de Vega’s El mundo nuevo descubierto por Cristóbal Colón; or a few pages of dialogue from the Benito Pérez Galdós novel La Fontana de Oro, in which liberal and conservative characters argue about the monarchy, popular sovereignty, and other divisive nineteenth-century political issues. While all these short authentic texts provided a rich mosaic of examples to illustrate the events or the worldviews of the periods described in the basic textbook, it was not clear to me that enough attention or time could be devoted to the texts in order for students to do anything but give them a cursory glance. I began to question the overall intellectual, cultural, or linguistic impact of merely tasting such textual tidbits. What were students carrying away from the course as a whole beyond a potpourri of facts about Spain? And what relation did this course, and its companion course Culture and Civilization of Latin America (sixth-semester Spanish), have to the literature courses that follow in our curriculum? Did our focus on excerpts of texts in these advanced-intermediate courses actually contribute to the aversion that many of our majors express when they move on to complete works read at the dreaded level of literature?

As an alternative to my previous approach, I greatly reduced the number of such authentic texts and replaced
them with Miguel Delibes’s 1985 novel El tesoro, read in weekly installments over the course of the semester. This novel depicts the conflicts that arise when a group of archaeologists from a university in Madrid are sent to a small Castilian village to investigate a treasure unearthed by a local farmer in a field. Not a novel I would necessarily choose for a twentieth-century literary course, it nevertheless seemed to provide a core from which we could explore other course topics: the impact of geography on daily life, the value of history in contemporary Spanish society, the relation between local power and the central government, rural Spain versus urban Spain, to name a few. Furthermore, I was interested in having students read the novel in line with Arens and Swaffar’s reading goals of communication and culture rather than approach it as I would ask them to do in a more conventional literature course. The course assignments and activities that accompanied the novel were designed to focus students’ efforts on processing and communicating, through speaking and writing, cultural information learned from the novel. Speaking activities included participation in small-group and large-group discussions and a final individual or oral interview with me on selected aspects of the novel. Writing tasks were more diverse and included both analytic and creative activities: the completion of content questions as preparation for class discussions; a contribution to a group narrative ballad featuring major events and characters in the novel in the tradition of a popular Spanish romance; a journalistic rendition of a major event of the novel from the perspective of one of three fictional Spanish newspapers, complete with accompanying headlines, photographs, and graphics; and an expository essay on the clash between the urban and rural mentalities in the book. In addition to my intellectual goals for students, I hoped that if they had a successful experience reading a complete novel in the first course for the major, they might start to see literature not exclusively as the irrelevant or hated focus of upper-level courses but also as a normal, if not pleasurable, activity somewhat akin to “just reading books” in their native English.

At the conclusion of the course, I asked all students enrolled in the two sections I taught to speak briefly on “just reading books” in their native English. At the conclusion of the course, I asked all students enrolled in the two sections I taught to speak briefly on “just reading books” in their native English.

Students’ comments represented a wide range of views. Several students found the book uninteresting as a novel; in contrast, one told me quite frankly that the class would have been “boring” without El tesoro. Yet another student confided to me after class one day that she would always treasure the actual physical object El tesoro as a “memento,” as it was the first whole book she had ever read in Spanish. Whatever their overall appraisal of the novel itself, students grappled with the value of using fiction to understand another culture in fascinating ways. One student expressed the view that the “reality” of a culture must be perceived through both “facts” and “experiences.” In the same vein, many students pointed out that whereas the culture-and-civilization textbook contains dates, statistics, and references to great events in history (the facts), El tesoro focuses on “interactions of real people” (the experiences). Paradoxically, they acknowledged that they knew that the novel’s characters and situations were fictional. One student, echoed by others, stated that the textbook “explains” or “tells” about Spain, but that El tesoro “shows” Spain. For example, as a classmate explained, the textbook presents “rural Spain as just an agricultural region,” devoid of people. Another student summarized the value of reading El tesoro, saying that the novel puts “a human face on the history” in the textbook by showing Spaniards “who aren’t stereotypes of Spain—bullfighters or Don Quijote.” A different class member described the textbook as a “photograph” frozen in time whereas El tesoro seems to take place in “real time,” because it shows “interactions” and “conflict.”

Exploring more deeply the value of El tesoro for Culture and Civilization of Spain, students focused on their personal connections with the novel and with questions beyond the novel. They seemed to be speaking through the lens of a developing narrative imagination. Comments such as these were frequent: “You can understand themes better through emotions,” “I can feel like what rural life is like [after reading El tesoro],” and “Fiction helps imagine rural Spain.” Some class members began to imagine how El tesoro might help Spaniards understand their own culture, wondering how rural Spaniards would react to the novel if they read it now or even how children born in Spain in the year 2000 would read it twenty years in the future, without having lived through the first years of the democratic transition after Franco’s death. One student said that reading novels like El tesoro “helps us think about: ‘What is culture?’ and ‘Who are we?’”

What Literature Should We Teach across the Curriculum?

I return to the question of what do we teach and where. It deserves attention from the profession at large and from us as individuals as we consider the structure of our local curricula and the needs of our students. Spreading literature across the curriculum in undergraduate Spanish programs at liberal arts institutions means, first of all, looking for and carefully selecting opportunities in both lower-division language classes and upper-division culture-
composition-conversation-grammar and other nonliterature classes in which a literary text could enhance or perhaps even replace some of what we are doing currently in our courses. We might use poems or short prose passages in conjunction with activities focusing on description at the first or second year of language, for instance, and thereafter use full texts instead of excerpts, such as novels in culture or composition classes or as plays in conversation classes. We might add literature to Spanish courses for special purposes (see Brenes García for an excellent description of her use of literature in a business Spanish course).

At the other end of the curriculum, where literature reigns supreme, we might supplement or replace some of our teacher-directed literary analysis activities with student-centered advanced-level language use activities that promote continued development of overall linguistic capacity, cross-cultural awareness, and discursive flexibility.

In this way we may meet the challenges of teaching languages, especially Spanish, in the twenty-first century and in preparing thoughtful, reflective citizens who will be lifelong readers of both books and literature in their second language as well as their first.

Notes

1 My questions coincide with those posed by David Richter in Falling into Theory (pdd. in Tesser and Long 627).

2 Graf’s discussions of critical literacy draw from Rose’s Lives on the Boundary (188), which he quotes on 91–92.

3 See Nussbaum, Cultivating Humanity: “As Heraclitus said 2,500 years ago: ‘Learning about many things does not produce understanding’” (85).

4 I am indebted to my colleague Maggie A. Broner, whose creative and successful use of a novel in a Hispanic linguistics course to explore the ethical dimensions of doing field research in linguistics was the inspiration for both of us to coordinate companion curricular experiments incorporating a novel into my Culture and Civilization of Spain and her Culture and Civilization of Latin American course and to begin ongoing collaboration. Preliminary results of our pilot project focusing on Spanish students’ perceptions of reading literature in Spanish have been reported in Barnes-Karol and Broner. My sincere gratitude is also on Spanish students’ perceptions of reading literature in Spanish have ongoing collaboration. Preliminary results of our pilot project focusing on Spanish students’ perceptions of reading literature in Spanish have been reported in Barnes-Karol and Broner. My sincere gratitude is also

5 In foreign languages across the curriculum (FLAC) courses, the content of the English-language disciplinary course (e.g., modern Latin American history) provides the intellectual background for the reading and analysis of Spanish-language primary documents in weekly Spanish-language discussion sessions. For a description of the Saint Olaf FLAC Program, see Anderson et al.

6 Although all students enrolled in the two sections of the course did this interview as a course requirement, the only comments re-produced here are from students who agreed to participate in a pilot project to collect data on students’ experiences in the course. Comments have been translated from the original Spanish.

7 For a compelling case for using authentic texts at the beginning level of foreign language instruction, see Maxim. While his model does not focus exclusively on reading literature, his many suggestions for using cultural texts in the first-year language classroom are readily adaptable to carefully selected literary texts. Readers may also wish to consult the brief text Hacia la literatura (Long et al.) for an approach that merits serious attention. Many of the principles the authors use to present literary texts, contextualize them culturally, and encourage active learning through speaking and writing intended for the advanced-intermediate level could be adapted for both lower and higher levels of instruction.

Works Cited


Defining liberal (arts) education is a perennial task and little agreement has been reached as to the essence, format and aims of higher education of this type. Viewed from the perspective of higher education systems in continental Europe, liberal (arts) education can be considered an innovation: promoting small scale, intensive and interdisciplinary education introducing students to all major fields of knowledge and developing their academic skills. In Eastern Europe, much has been said about its role in providing for active and responsible citizenship and the ability to manoeuvre the realit Download Citation | On Jan 1, 2002, Gwendolyn Barnes-Karol and others published Literature across the Curriculum: One View of Spanish from an Undergraduate Liberal Arts Perspective | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate. To respond to this question, language and literary cultural content in advanced FL contexts are addressed from the perspective of three trends evidenced in published research: (1) conceptualizations of literature and culture within the advanced level curriculum, (2) integration of language and literary cultural content at the course level, and (3) incorporation of advanced language and content at the curricular level. Spanish literature generally refers to literature (Spanish poetry, prose, and drama) written in the Spanish language within the territory that presently constitutes the Kingdom of Spain. Its development coincides and frequently intersects with that of other literary traditions from regions within the same territory, particularly Catalan literature, Galician intersects as well with Latin, Jewish, and Arabic literary traditions of the Iberian peninsula. The literature of Spanish America is an important