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Hispania White Paper:

Where are the Experts?



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Most collegiate departments where one can find Spanish, French, German, and other non-English disciplines are referred to as “language departments,” either formally or informally. Such designations are interesting as they suggest to the outsider (i.e., non-language person) that these departments consist of experts in language. In this essay, I will lay out the argument that this is not the case. I will argue that a focus on literature and culture does not make for expertise in language. I will then offer representative demographic research on the percentage of language faculty that can be considered experts in language. As will be seen, the percentage is quite low. Subsequently, I will describe some of the consequences of this low percentage, and I will conclude with an open letter to deans and other administrators regarding the current state of affairs. As will become evident, underlying the issues raised in this essay are the development of language proficiency and the nature of language teaching in university settings. Because language departments are generally charged with language instruction, and because students (and others) often expect some kind of proficiency at the end of an undergraduate career in languages, it is not trivial to ask: who is driving the bus of language development?

A Focus on Literature and Culture is not a Focus on Language

The focus of most language departments at research universities is cultural and literary studies (I will present sample demographic research on this matter in the next section). At the risk of simplifying disciplines, the purpose of literary and cultural studies involves the analysis (interpretation) and preservation of what is typically called cultural production. In the case of most language departments, cultural production refers to literary texts, certain kinds of essays, theater, and film, among other human endeavors. The purpose of literary and cultural studies has evolved over the years and may indeed depend on the particular context of one’s scholarly pursuit (e.g., medieval studies as compared to twenty first-century studies, and European-oriented studies as compared to Latino Studies). But what is clear is that the focus of such research and the expertise developed in the formation of scholars is the analysis of “text,” whatever that text may be and however one chooses to define “analysis.” Nowhere in contemporary cultural and literary studies is language the object of research. That is, the nature of language, its representation in the mind-brain of humans, and how language is processed, acquired, and used do not constitute the center (or even periphery) of research in cultural and literary studies. Cultural and literary scholars are not experts in language, a point I will develop below.¹

In contrast to cultural and literary studies are the language sciences. In the language sciences, the object of inquiry is the nature of language itself—with language scientists focusing on various areas, including how language is represented in the mind-brain (often referred to as theoretical linguistics), how language is produced and comprehended (generally referred

to as psycholinguistics), and how language is acquired. Although traditionally there has been separation between first language acquisition and second language acquisition, at the macrolevel of scholarship, there is good reason to group all contexts of language acquisition under one umbrella as researchers look for answers to questions regarding universality/constraints imposed by the human mind-brain along with the effects of bilingualism. In short, language acquisition is linked to more general cognitive science. Because those of us working within the language sciences endeavor to determine the nature of language and how it is acquired, it is fair to say that language scientists are experts in language. It is their domain of investigation.

So what exactly makes a language scientist an expert on language compared to scholars in literary and cultural studies? I will illustrate with a simple example: *wh-* (*who, what where, why, how*) questions in Spanish and English. The two sentences below ask the exact same thing in the two languages:

Where does Bill teach?
¿Dónde enseña Bill?

Any non-expert in language can readily see that *wh-* questions don't look alike in Spanish and English. And any non-language expert who teaches English might be able to say, "Well, English inserts a *do* before the subject." And any non-language expert who teaches Spanish could say, "To make a question you invert the subject and the verb." These simplistic descriptions beg a number of questions:

- 1) Are such statements representative of what actually exists in the mind/brain of a first- or second-language speaker of English or Spanish?
- 2) Why are English and Spanish different?
- 3) Why do the *wh-* words appear in the same part of the sentence (they don't in Chinese, for example)?
- 4) What is a sentential subject and what is a verb for that matter? (There may also be other questions.)

As language scientists seek answers to these questions—from whatever theoretical perspective—they find there are deep, abstract, and complex things going on in language that account for the differences (and similarities) between Spanish and English. Their findings also suggest what the nature of mental representation cannot be—and it doesn't look anything like what the non-expert says. Pedagogical rules such as "invert the subject and verb" are external ways to talk about mental "stuff" that is just too abstract to describe simply. Most pedagogical rules and descriptions are like this. As interesting as questions (1) through (4) above may be, this essay is not the place to address them in any detail.

Different from mental representation is the issue of how *wh-* questions (i.e., the underlying features and syntactic operations necessary for a question to be a question) are acquired. What does development over time look like and why does it look the way it does? Why do learners produce some nonnative-like structures but not others? Why don't learners simply apply the pedagogical rules they are learning and why are the effects of instruction on the acquisition of grammatical properties of language severely constrained? And is it easier to acquire *wh-* questions in Spanish or in English or do both present challenges to learners? In short, how is language acquired and how do we account for this acquisition? Again, the focus of this essay is not to answer these questions. The point is simply to suggest that investigation into the nature of acquisition, and by extension any implications for language teaching, is the field of language acquisition experts.

It is safe to assume that no scholar of literary and cultural studies exits a doctoral program with the kind of knowledge about language and language acquisition briefly outlined here.

The reasons are not really relevant. What is germane to the present discussion is that scholars of cultural or literary studies typically do not develop such knowledge during the course of a career (an important point I will return to later in the section on consequences). As one marches toward tenure and promotion, scholars of literary and cultural studies do not become experts in language. The point is simply that the vast majority of scholars populating academic “language” departments are not experts in language or language acquisition. In the next section, I will provide some simple demographics to illustrate this.

An Examination of Research Institutions

For the purpose of the present discussion, I am going to focus on the two languages with which I tend to work the most: Spanish and French. In addition, I am limiting my remarks to major research institutions that offer doctoral programs in Spanish and French, as these are the loci for graduate training and thus the education of faculty and the delineation of expertise. They also often serve as the models for other kinds of universities and colleges. The institutions include a representative sample from the Midwest and the two coasts of the United States. Using department websites available at the time of writing (August 2014), I have sought to ascertain the percentage of faculty who have expertise in and conduct research in some kind of language science of the type under discussion in this essay. Excluded from my examination are non-tenure stream faculty (e.g., lecturers and senior lecturers), faculty on visiting appointments without permanence, faculty from other disciplines (e.g., English, History) with courtesy appointments, emeritus faculty, and, in general, any faculty member who does not have a full-time tenure line appointment in either Spanish or French. I have delimited the faculty along these lines because I am interested in those who actually educate graduate students in the major areas of concentration, as these graduate students then go out and become faculty themselves. I will discuss later the issue of non-tenure line faculty and their expertise.

The CIC Institutions

The acronym CIC stands for the Committee on Institutional Cooperation, an organization composed of major Midwest research institutions with a few non-Midwest universities recently added (i.e., University of Maryland, Penn State University, Rutgers University). A total of 15 institutions participate and all are major research-1 universities (see <http://www.cic.net/home> for details). I have broken the data down by language as well as subdisciplines within the language sciences (see Table 1).

Table 1. Number and percentage of faculty in Spanish and French programs in the CIC universities with expertise in literary studies, linguistics, and language acquisition

| | Spanish | French |
|--|------------|------------|
| Literary/Cultural Studies | 167 (76%) | 126 (90%) |
| Linguistics | 33 (15%) | 11 (8%) |
| Language Acquisition | 18 (8%) | 3 (2%) |
| Other (e.g., methodology, translation) | 3 (1%) | 0 (0%) |
| Total | 221 (100%) | 140 (100%) |

The East and West Coasts

As a comparative measure, I looked at six prominent West Coast research institutions. Four were public (UC Berkeley, UCLA, UC Santa Barbara, UC Davis) and two were private (USC, Stanford). I used the same criteria as in the CIC analysis for inclusion of faculty. The results appear in Table 2. For the East Coast, I did the same as for the West Coast and looked at six research institutions. Excluded were the Ivy League schools (except for U Penn), for which no language department can claim any language expert at all. In the Ivy League system, 0% of the tenure-line or tenured faculty in language departments are language experts as defined here. So, I selected the following institutions for the present demographic research: the University of Massachusetts, the University of Pennsylvania, Georgetown University, the University of Virginia, University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, and the University of Florida. Again, I applied the same criteria as in the previous two cases. The results appear in Table 3.

Table 2. Number and percentage of faculty in Spanish and French programs in six West-coast research universities with expertise in literary studies, linguistics, and language acquisition

| | Spanish | French |
|--|-----------|-----------|
| Literary/Cultural Studies | 57 (90%) | 53 (95%) |
| Linguistics | 6 (10%) | 2 (4%) |
| Language Acquisition | 0 (0%) | 1 (1%) |
| Other (e.g., methodology, translation) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |
| Total | 63 (100%) | 56 (100%) |

Table 3. Number and percentage of faculty in Spanish and French programs in six East-coast research universities with expertise in literary studies, linguistics, and language acquisition

| | Spanish | French |
|--|-----------|-----------|
| Literary/Cultural Studies | 47 (80%) | 50 (96%) |
| Linguistics | 9 (15%) | 2 (4%) |
| Language Acquisition | 4 (7%) | 0 (0%) |
| Other (e.g., methodology, translation) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |
| Total | 59 (100%) | 52 (100%) |

All Institutions

As a summary statistic, I combined all the data to obtain a snapshot of the tenure-line professoriate in Spanish and French at PhD granting institutions across the United States. These data appear in Table 4.

Table 4. Combined number and percentage of faculty in Spanish and French programs with expertise in literary studies, linguistics, and language acquisition

| | Spanish | French |
|--|------------|------------|
| Literary/Cultural Studies | 271 (79%) | 229 (92%) |
| Linguistics | 48 (14%) | 15 (6%) |
| Language Acquisition | 22 (6%) | 4 (2%) |
| Other (e.g., methodology, translation) | 3 (1%) | 0 (0%) |
| Total | 344 (100%) | 248 (100%) |

Discussion of the Distributions

The trends in the data are self evident, but I will highlight here what I think are the most important take-aways from the data.

- The combined expertise (linguistics, language acquisition, language teaching) of tenure-line faculty members at PhD granting institutions in Spanish is about 20%. For French, it is about 8%.
- Within the combined expertise, only 6% of the faculty in Spanish has any expertise in second-language acquisition; in French it is about 2%.
- As can be seen, Spanish fairs a bit better than French in terms of faculty expertise in language.

Of particular interest is the very low percentage of faculty with expertise in language acquisition. Language acquisition is the place where the rubber meets the road, so to speak. Ideally, the language acquisitionist possesses both a strong theoretical background in language and a strong background in acquisition, and these are the people who presumably understand language acquisition most profoundly and have the best chance of informing language teaching. That only 6% of Spanish faculty and 2% of French faculty have such expertise indicates a major lacuna in “language” departments. What is more, and what is not represented in Table 4, for example, is that of the 27 institutions examined, 13 (48%) had no language acquisition experts at all in Spanish, and a whopping 21(78%) had no language acquisition experts in French. And I remind the reader why I did not include the Ivy League schools: they have 0% language experts across the board, data that would have lowered the percentages in Table 3 even more, as well as the overall percentage of institutions (Table 4) with no experts. Why these numbers are important should be obvious: if these are typical of the PhD granting institutions in the United States, then few language experts exit our doctoral programs.

Now someone might argue that many of these departments do have experts in language and language acquisition—they just aren’t traditional tenure line—and this is sometimes the case. These non-tenure line personnel are often largely responsible for overseeing language programs (i.e., first- and second-year programs). However, most of their duties are circumscribed, thus limiting the effects they might have on both language programs and the curriculum outside of these programs. More often than not, they do not teach upper-level courses; they do not teach graduate courses that form part of the principle area of any student (or secondary area for that matter); and, in general, they do not have a significant impact on the overall development of graduate students in terms of being experts in language. They do not direct dissertations and their job descriptions generally do not require continued scholarly work in language expertise

as a condition of employment. In fact, one could argue that the use of such non-tenure line personnel is precisely to keep language expertise out of the major and secondary areas of study for graduate students, reducing such expertise to something incidental and without much significance in the graduate student's training.

As a response, my colleagues in literary and cultural studies might claim, "But we *are* experts in language and language teaching." Their argument would be that after many years in the profession and because of their earlier days as "language teachers" they have expertise. The truth is they have some kind of expertise, but they are not experts in language as outlined here. As I will argue later (see consequences), they may be skilled as textbook users, but not skilled in thinking beyond the confines of what textbooks offer. What they do tends to promote the status quo when it comes to language instruction (again, see below under consequences).

Finally, for those institutions that do "boast" a tenure-line expert in language, the argument is often that one expert is enough. In the same vein that departments often have a checklist for their curricular needs (e.g., we need a medieval expert, we need a nineteenth-century expert), the single tenure line expert is a line item on that checklist. The problems with this approach are multiple. First and foremost, such positions are largely used the same way non-tenure line positions are used: to oversee language programs. The effect that such faculty members can exert on the rest of the curriculum, including the graduate curriculum, is minimal. Second, to say that one expert in language is enough is like saying one expert in literary and cultural studies is enough. One has to imagine the scenario in which one and only one tenure line expert in literary and cultural studies is responsible for the full gamut of what a graduate student is to learn about the field of literary studies. The same issue holds true for language expertise; there is no single faculty member who can be responsible for the full gamut of what it takes to help graduate students develop into language experts as described here. If we examine the doctoral program in second language studies at Michigan State University, for example, we find 11 tenure line faculty representing a wide range of subareas within the language sciences related to language learning and teaching: the acquisition of morphosyntax; language processing; the effects of instruction; the acquisition of phonology; the acquisition of discourse and writing; issues related to identity and language acquisition; and technology and its interface with language learning; among others. And down the hall the linguistics program boasts experts in syntax, semantics, phonology, pragmatics, neurolinguistics, and child language acquisition, among others, all of which complement and link with the program in second language studies.

Before continuing, I wish to underscore that the point of this essay is not to explain the current makeup of language departments. How doctoral granting programs arrived at having more than 80% of non-experts in language is not the purpose of this paper. The purpose is simply to describe their current makeup and to discuss the consequences of that makeup.

Consequences of the Lack of Experts

In any discipline or work-related area (e.g., sociology, neurosurgery, building-razing), a lack of experts has consequences. In academia, a lack of language experts in language departments also results in a range of consequences. I outline some of those here. My list, of course, is not exhaustive and I will only touch on four consequences.

1. Perpetuation of Myths about Language

Without a strong presence of language experts in a language department, old notions (myths) about language tend to predominate. Such myths include the myth that language is a list of rules, such as those found in textbooks or the myth that such things as verbal paradigms are psychologically real in the sense that expert speakers and knowers of a language actually

have paradigms in their heads. Indeed, the idea that verb endings (to take one example) are part of the grammar as opposed to part of the lexicon (or even distributed throughout the linguistic system) is prevalent among non-experts. Non-experts do not understand that what looks like a sentence is the result not of rules per se but a complex interplay between underlying and abstract features, syntactic computations, constraints on computations, and interfaces between syntax and the lexicon, between syntax and semantics, between syntax and discourse/pragmatics, between phonology and the lexicon (where morphology resides), and others. And not only are there myths about language, but there are myths about communication. Most non-experts do not have a working definition of communication that resembles even the most rudimentary technical definitions.

2. *Perpetuation of Myths about Language Acquisition and Language Teaching*

Perhaps one of the more critical sets of consequences of non-expertise in language and language acquisition involves a lack of understanding about how language actually develops over time. Some of the myths perpetuated in language departments include that explicitly teaching grammar and vocabulary is necessary or even beneficial, that correction of learner output is necessary, that practice makes perfect, that learners acquire rules and paradigms (see above on language), that learning vocabulary and grammar is a prerequisite to learning to communicate, that first-language transfer is the source of all learning problems, that adults learn languages differently from children, among many, many others. Let's take one myth in particular to examine its consequences.

It is widely believed among non-experts that children and adults are different, therefore children and adults learn differently. Although it is true that adults and children are different in many ways, is it the case that children and adults necessarily learn differently? More specifically, does it follow that children and adults learn *language* differently? Forty years of research on adult second language acquisition has cast serious doubt on this; in fact, in some quarters of second language research the evidence overwhelmingly points toward the same mechanisms underlying language acquisition in both children and adults. To be sure, there are external differences: adults "like" to be in control of learning, children not necessarily so; adults "like" things to be explained to them, children not necessarily so; the communicative demands placed on adults are different from those placed on children; adults tend to find themselves in formal language-learning environments (e.g., classrooms) whereas children often do not (and certainly do not if we are considering first language acquisition). There are other external differences. But *internally*, adults and children appear to be constrained by the same mechanisms during language acquisition regardless of context, and the fundamental ingredients of language acquisition are at play in both situations: input (communicatively embedded language that learners hear or see, if sign language); Universal Grammar coupled with general learning architecture; and processing mechanisms that mediate between input and the internal architecture. In short, much of what we observe as differences between adults and children are externally imposed differences; not differences in underlying linguistic and psycholinguistic aspects of acquisition. And some of those externally imposed differences are a direct result of myths about language acquisition that dominate most language departments.

I emphasize here that as a field of empirical research, second language acquisition does not have answers to all questions. But there is a wealth of accumulated evidence that points to what we might call fundamental facts about language acquisition. Among these facts are the necessity of communicative input for the development of an underlying mental representation, that communicative ability cannot be practiced but develops from acts of communication, that there are severe constraints on the role of explicit teaching and learning in development, that the acquisition of "grammar" does not precede communication but emerges along with it, that

variation in learner output is expected, among a number of others. It is precisely these facts that elude most language departments in the twenty first century.

3. Perpetuation of Lack of Training of Future Professoriate

At a special panel on the nature of language teaching held years ago at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, a participant quipped that the glaciers moved faster than language teaching. His point was that advances in language teaching—particularly at the collegiate level—are exceedingly slow. And in this quip we find another consequence of the lack of expertise in language and language acquisition in language departments: advances in language teaching are slow (in some cases, non-existent) because the professoriate and instructional staff at the collegiate level cannot educate and train the future professoriate for innovation. Let's take a concrete example.

In the 1980s, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) launched an ambitious campaign to have its Proficiency Guidelines (PGs) inform language testing and, through washback, inform language teaching. The PGs were based on scalar ability, that is, what learners could do with language (e.g., describe their families, handle routine social needs, describe what they do for a living, narrate a funny story from their childhood). The PGs and the proficiency tests used to place students on a scale were clearly different from various standardized testing, which largely consist of tests of knowledge—explicit knowledge of learned textbook rules and paradigms, not underlying linguistic knowledge (see above). Although not informed by second language research, the PGs have a natural tie to second language research in that any second language researcher can examine the guidelines and see some basic aspects of acquisition reflected in them: the dissociation between explicit knowledge and underlying knowledge; the slow growth of linguistic output over time; the developmental constraints on language; among others. The question is how did ACTFL's campaign fair? The answer is “not so good,” at least at the collegiate level. What ACTFL underestimated, in my opinion, is the lack of basic knowledge about language and language acquisition among the professoriate, and that this lack is perpetuated because the existing professoriate cannot train and educate new faculty with the requisite expertise to fully understand the PGs and, subsequently, how to fashion curricula to develop proficiency. How do I know that the PGs did not have the substantial impact that ACTFL would have liked? My travels across the country in which I am invited to lecture suggest the impact has been nearly as great as anticipated. Here, I offer one example to illustrate.

Almost 30 years after the launch of the PGs, a colleague and I hosted a focus group along with a publisher in which some 20 faculty members from different colleges and universities were invited. These faculty members were specifically asked to participate because they had indicated solid knowledge of the Proficiency Guidelines during the recruitment phase and at the same time were typical of faculty across the country; that is, they were non-experts in language. Ignoring for now what the purpose of the focus group was, we discovered the following. First, no one in the room could identify the samples we offered as intermediate-mid speakers of Spanish. They all assumed the speakers were at the novice level. Second, when asked to examine first- and second-year textbooks to see what grammar and vocabulary could be eliminated from the curriculum if the goal of a two-year college sequence was intermediate-mid speaking, the participants were almost paralytic; they could barely eliminate anything, even those things that would seem obvious to many of us as not contributing at all to intermediate-mid proficiency. Finally, when asked how proficiency developed, most of them stated in some way or another, many of the myths about language learning and teaching touched on earlier. The point of this example is that a full generation after the launch of the Proficiency Guidelines, we could not see much difference in the knowledge and ability of this group of professors compared to those who

perhaps trained them in the 1980s and 1990s. And these are the current professoriate presumably in charge of training and educating future language teachers.

As one additional example, I offer another anecdote. I frequently give lectures on language acquisition and language teaching to departments, programs, school districts, and the like. In some of these presentations, I may ask the audience to work in groups of two to three people to define the construct “communication.” Now, let’s keep in mind these are all practicing professionals who claim to be teaching for proficiency and communicative use of language. Presumably, they have some kind of training. What invariably happens is that from this group of practicing professionals, I get non-expert definitions that look amazingly like those given by my friends who aren’t in the profession and aren’t even academics. And these definitions are not particularly good. What this anecdote illustrates is that collegiate language teachers often work in the dark, with little understanding of the object of their efforts.

4. Perpetuation of the Standard Textbook Scope and Sequence

Because of the previous consequences, a secondary but no less important consequence is that a lack of language experts perpetuates the nature of language teaching materials. Included are the following:

- a scope and sequence for grammar and vocabulary expected of all first-year and second-year materials;
- presentation plus practice of the grammar and vocabulary, especially “oral” practice;
- testing of knowledge of language as opposed to communicative ability;
- an underlying belief that students must “master” the material in the textbooks to be successful.

In spite of the competition among publishers for faculty business in language teaching, language textbooks look amazingly alike with only superficial differences. The knowledge of grammar and vocabulary that students are supposed to learn is largely the same from textbook to textbook. That is, there is no real choice among language textbooks about “what” to teach. What is more, the format of textbooks is largely the same: vocabulary is presented first, then the practice of that vocabulary, followed by a grammar presentation that is then practiced, with this cycle repeating. The cycle may be punctuated by a cultural or literary reading (or a video) depending on the level of the materials. Instructional support materials are also remarkably similar, with all tests provided focusing mostly on testing the grammar and vocabulary explained and practiced. What this commonality among materials suggests is that somehow language teachers have “agreed” on some common syllabus and approach to teaching. And indeed they unconsciously have. But on what has the collective thought processes of the profession based its decision about what to be in textbooks? Is it based on some expertise in language, language acquisition, and language teaching? The answer is, of course, no. What we find in language teaching materials (at all levels, by the way) is simple historical inertia from decades and decades of “that’s how it’s done.” Nowhere are language teaching materials genuinely informed by what we know about language and language acquisition, for example, in spite of what publishers may tout in a preface or back cover. Nor are the materials informed by what we know about the development of proficiency. Additionally, most graduate students who take what is traditionally called a “methods course” do not exit such a course with any knowledge that actually helps them think beyond textbooks and what textbooks present. And yet, many of us in the language sciences would challenge the foundations of current textbooks and language teaching (and testing) materials, but because there are so few of us in language departments, we do not have the political and social clout to make any real changes in the nature of language teaching or textbook content. As long as the content

of textbooks as well as textbook decisions remain in the hands of non-experts in language and language acquisition, real advances in language teaching materials will be impeded.

Before concluding this section, I need to return to a point I raised early on in this paper: that no scholar of cultural or literary studies typically develops expertise in language during the course of a career. A good friend, after reading an earlier version of this essay, asked about his colleagues who were basically trained in literary studies but because of their jobs took interest in language teaching. That is, they wound up at non-doctoral institutions where emphasis is placed on the undergraduate experience. My friend pointed out that some of them have retooled themselves in language teaching. They have made valiant attempts to redesign curricula and otherwise attempt to make what some might consider transformative changes in language instruction. My friend's point is well taken and, to be sure, we would have to applaud such efforts. But I also know that in spite of their good efforts, such faculty members rarely become experts in language as defined here. That is, they are aware of and may attempt to implement many current trends in language teaching to greater or lesser degrees, but ultimately, none of them are actually experts in language or language acquisition. One can "see the light" so to speak but not have an underlying grasp of what that light actually is. Again, my friend and I welcome the efforts of such colleagues and would endeavor to help them in any way we can. However, the focus of this essay is research institutions where the professoriate is trained, and in these institutions we continue to have a dearth of experts in language and especially language acquisition. So, the situation presented in the present paper is bound to continue—unless there is some change in academia.

An Open Letter to Deans

In my three decades in university life, it is clear to me that unless language experts speak directly to the administration above their own departments, deans and other administrators will only know what is communicated to them by department chairs. And because it is exceedingly rare that a department chair is an expert in language and language acquisition (especially at research institutions of higher education), deans and other administrators most likely get filtered and outdated ideas about language and language teaching. To that end, I offer an open letter to deans across the country that can be used to begin dialogue on the issues raised in this white paper, assuming such dialogue is wanted by administrators. The reader should feel free to cut and paste this letter and send it to the appropriate person.

Dear Dean,

You are receiving this letter because someone has forwarded it to you, presumably under the assumption that you have an interest in questions related to how adults learn languages and what kind of proficiency is possible from adults in a university curriculum. If you have no such interest, I apologize for the intrusion and you may ignore the rest of this letter. If you do have such interest, I will try to be succinct in what I say and at the end of this letter will offer you a link to a website if you'd like to read a bit more.

It is common belief that language departments consist of experts in language and language learning. I am writing to tell you that this is not true. Language departments are largely—and in some cases, exclusively—concerned with literary and cultural studies. Such departments have little concern for the nature of language and less concern for how language is acquired. In most language departments, outdated myths about language and language acquisition inform most curricular development and pedagogical practice at all levels.

The reason for these outdated myths is that there is no real presence of language science in these departments. As a consequence, many language departments are not the best places to learn language—in spite of what you might hear.

With the above said, I do not mean to question literary and cultural studies. Where would the humanities be without such efforts? But if you haven't already found the following out, I will say it plainly: an expert in literary and cultural studies is almost always not an expert in language, language acquisition, or language teaching, in spite of what that person might claim. In fact, demographic data suggest that less than 20% of the professoriate in language departments actually consists of language experts (i.e., hold doctorates in some kind of language science and conduct research in this expertise). Six percent or less (depending on the language) are actual experts in language acquisition—a field that has direct implications for language teaching. In many institutions, there are no experts in language or language acquisition in a language department.

To be sure, you might be thinking that you have expertise in your department. Maybe you have hired someone who is in charge of the language program in a particular department. But if we are honest and did a close inspection of our departments we would see a number of things that suggest what I claim here is true (i.e., language departments are not the best places to learn language). The first is that such faculty members have limited influence outside of the language program. That is, there is no language expertise informing instructional practice, curriculum development, or outcomes at the upper division levels. The second thing we would see is that such people have virtually no presence at the graduate level. How many doctoral students exit their programs with a major or even a minor in the nature of language and the nature of language acquisition? Language expertise cannot be obtained in a one-shot “methods” course that some departments offer their graduate students. Such knowledge cannot be obtained in a hit-or-miss set of workshops that graduate students might attend. Expertise in language and language acquisition is serious scholarly business, in the same way that expertise in quantum mechanics, expertise in colonial history, and expertise in Greek philosophy are serious business. If you prefer, you can think of the situation this way. Imagine your language department is a hospital, full of experts in different things. There are oncologists, radiologists, neurosurgeons, anesthesiologists, orthopedic surgeons, and other experts. You go to the hospital in need of knee repair because you are finally paying for all those years of long-distance running. Who do you want to operate on your knee? The oncologist? The radiologist? You want the appropriate orthopedic surgeon. Well, language departments are like hospitals, and if you want an expert in language, language acquisition, and language teaching, you don't talk to the medievalist or the nineteenth-century specialist in poetry. You talk to the language acquisition experts—if you have any.

Finally, perhaps you've been told that language experts aren't tenurable, that we don't produce scholarship, that our field isn't scholarly, or something similar. To this I respond by inviting you to view my website and CV, and to ask me for additional websites and CVs. You can judge for yourself.

So, if one of the goals of your students' college career is some kind of proficiency in a language, I urge you to ask yourself the question, “Where

are the experts in language science that inform this goal?” It is the experts in language science—most importantly, those in language acquisition—that can address your concerns and questions. I promised to be succinct and have left out much information that informs this open letter. If you’d like to follow up, I invite you to access a white paper on this topic at <https://sites.google.com/site/bvpsla/>.

Sincerely,

Bill VanPatten
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NOTE

¹To be sure, those in literary studies are expert language *users*. That is, they themselves are skilled at the use of language for communicative purposes, and as analysts of cultural production, they are adept at “reading language” from a critical viewpoint. It should be clear, however, that this kind of expertise is not the focus of the present essay.