Form, Content, and Critical Distance: The Role of "Creative Personalization" in Language and Content Courses

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Abstract: Many academic programs maintain a rigid philosophical and pedagogical separation between introductory language courses and upper-division, so-called "content" courses. Such programs tend to consign matters of form to the elementary- through advanced-level language sequence, placing emphasis on meaning in literature and culture courses. This article offers suggestions for drawing attention to form and content in both types of courses. By implementing strategies for revising traditional speaking and writing tasks through "creative personalization," teachers may guide students to enhance critical thinking skills across the language/literature curriculum, and to become more aware of the interdependence of form and content in their own speech and writing.

Introduction

The tension between form and content has long flavored theoretical and programmatic debates over approaches to second-language teaching. Students and instructors alike perceive this tension in the day-to-day practice of learning and teaching languages. For example, college students of all ages know the humbling experience of having to tailor the depth and nuances of their message to fit the limited formal structures available to them. And even the most motivated teachers lose steam from time to time, trying to animate conversations about favorite breakfast foods once again. In other words, learners' inevitably limited command of form, and subsequently restricted range of content in the utterances they produce, lead to frustration in the elementary- and intermediate-level classroom. At the same time, a form/content division still defines the curriculum in many secondary- and university-level language programs, where unmet expectations of formal mastery fuel complaints — on the part of both teachers and students — about students' linguistic preparation for upper-division "content" courses taught in the target language.

These observations raise two questions central to the following discussion and proposed pedagogical tools. First, how might teachers fine-tune their existing battery of classroom activities to enhance students' awareness of the way form and content function together in language production? Second, how might teachers sustain attention to content, form, and productive skills in the so-called "content" courses?

The Separation of Form and Content

Over the past two decades, context and content have played an increasingly important role in beginning and intermediate language courses. This trend is most notable in Whole Language...
approaches to grammar presentation (see summary in Shrum & Glisan, 2000, pp. 34–35), in practical applications of Schema Theory to the development of receptive skills (e.g., Byrnes, 1985; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Phillips, 1984), and in a movement toward Content-Based Instruction (Dupuy, 2000; Stryker & Leaver, 1997). Paradoxically, many academic programs divided by the language/literature rift persist in relegating matters of form to the “language” courses, while stressing meaning in “content” courses such as literature, civilization, cultural studies, and film studies. Any difficulties of form and accuracy are expected to have been ironed out before students reach the upper-level courses. Yet proficiency guidelines (Omaggio Hadley, 1993, pp. 233–234) describe what experience and observation reveal every day: that language learning continues long after the first two or three years of language courses are successfully completed. It seems only logical, then, that as lower-level courses incorporate more content, so should form be addressed even in the most advanced, more traditionally content-focused courses.

Despite a movement toward cognitive approaches to language teaching, and a heightened awareness of critical thinking across the curriculum (McPeck, 1981; Meyers 1986; Carpenter & Doig, 1988), attention to the symbiosis between form and meaning often fails to the wayside in language curricula. While recent research on form and meaning in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has generated lively and significant discussions of classroom practice and curricular reform with a “focus on form” (Doughty & Williams, 1988; Lee & Valdman, 2000), the scope of this article will not extend to engagement in this very important discourse. Instead, the following pages offer practical suggestions for revising basic speaking and writing tasks, with the interdependence of form and content in mind. These revisions aim to make students themselves more aware of the function of form and content in their own speech and writing. All of the tasks presented are designed to be implemented easily within the scope and sequence of any existing textbook, syllabus, and/or curriculum.

“Overpersonalization” and “Underpersonalization”

Personalization of content in speaking and writing tasks works well as a default strategy to enhance participation and interest on the part of students. However, in an effort to reduce anxiety and maximize participation, it is tempting to overpersonalize speaking and writing activities in the lower-level courses. Conversely, students in upper division courses are often discouraged from expressing their personal reactions to texts and films, so that they will instead develop a critical and scholarly perspective. But how will students develop a scholarly voice in a second language if they do not discover their own voice first? And how will students in language courses learn to express themselves engagingly, if they repetitively narrate and describe the details of their lives, with little concern for how this material might anesthetize their audience?

Over the years that I have spent reflecting on my own teaching, and discussing pedagogical matters with colleagues and, especially, the Graduate Teaching Assistants who work with me, I have come to refer to certain pedagogical phenomena as “overpersonalization” and “underpersonalization.” In the following pages I describe practical revisions of familiar “overpersonalized” and “underpersonalized” tasks, in the interest of helping students to develop their own voices in a second language. Through what I call “creative personalization,” teachers may reshape traditionally personalized speaking and writing activities in language courses, promoting “one degree of critical distance” between learners and the content of their writing and speech. Through composition and guided analysis of their own writing samples in “content” courses, students learn to examine their own utterances in order to discover how their use of form affects perception of their meaning.

Overpersonalization in Language Courses

Despite the pitfalls of its overuse, personalization can play an important role in creating a lively classroom dynamic and bolstering students’ self-confidence and motivation. Theorists of diverse camps identify learners’ attitudes and interest as fundamental components of second-language acquisition (see summary in Omaggio Hadley, 1993, pp. 63–68). By personalizing speaking and writing exercises, we may motivate students to express themselves willingly and with interest in the target language. As long as they are not intrusive, personalized speaking and writing activities can put students at ease, perhaps lowering the affective filter (Krashen, 1982): Students may be less anxious about speaking in the target language if they are in control of what they are saying and are certain about its factual accuracy.

Indeed, the ACTFL Assessment Criteria for speaking proficiency (summarized by Omaggio Hadley, 1993, p. 15) reflect the benefits of keeping the content of students’ speech close to home at the novice and intermediate levels. As Buck, Burns, and Thompson explain (1989), the lower the level of proficiency, the harder it is for students to discuss content that is not autobiographical and personal. With theory and experience pointing toward the utility of personalized contexts in language production, we should certainly give students opportunities to talk and write about themselves in language classes. However, personalizing activities too often or too extensively will lead students to become insensitive to their interlocutors and readers, and perhaps by extension to become only mildly

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engaged listeners and readers themselves.

It is with the role of listener or reader in mind that I propose a reframing of certain tasks assigned to exercise productive skills. Speaking and writing tasks usually emphasize the speaker/writer's ability to discuss a given topic, but often overlook the narrative function of the text and its audience. The "real" audience may include the teacher, partners in small-group work, and/or the whole class. Role-playing activities, for example, allow students to create original, spontaneous, functional language in a simulated authentic context. Once role-plays are performed before the entire class, though, their function and audience shift. From the performers' perspective, the "real" narrative function may be simply to entertain, impress, or amuse the class, and of course, the teacher. To some extent, presentations of this kind may heighten the audience's awareness of grammatical, lexical, and sociolinguistic functions. Ideally, the audience should sharpen listening skills during these performances as well. As many teachers have undoubtedly noted, however, it is difficult to get students to listen to their classmates' presentations, particularly if these presentations are dull or difficult to understand. Instead of listening, students often worry about their own impending performances.

A potential and thorough way to focus attention on listening during classroom performances would involve incorporating modifications of guided listening tasks, such as those described in the literature on building Receptive Skills (Glisan, 1988; Wing, 1986). Students listening to one another would indeed benefit from sequenced activities of the kind recommended to aid in the comprehension of authentic listening texts: preparation; skimming/scanning; comprehension; integrating skills (Glisan, 1988, pp. 13–15). Yet the fast turnover time between planning, practice, and production of student-generated, performative speech makes such an approach cumbersome. A more practical alternative is to design performative tasks with simple features built in, to enhance attention to listeners' needs in the composition phase, and to motivate the listeners themselves during the performances.

For example, when students are preparing and presenting creative projects to be heard or read by others (such as magazine ads, brochures, group compositions, and dialogues) the teacher requires that each group incorporate a particular word, expression, object, or image anywhere in the final product. Students then compose their spoken or written texts with their audience's reactions in mind. Curious to see how each group has integrated this "red herring," students engage with greater interest — and pleasure — in their classmates' presentations. Simple strategies of this kind implicitly heighten an awareness of speaker/listener dynamics for the student/performers as well as the student/audience, from the composition phase through the performance phase of the activity.

Like some group performance activities, student monologues, however brief, often fail to take "real" listener/reader needs into account. This is particularly true when students narrate straightforward, personal facts (a very obvious example: "describe your best friend to the class"). The speakers, too, often derive minimal benefits from too much personalization. Students tend to over-practice familiar, "favorite" words and phrases when asked to produce very personal utterances. In fact, the predictability of the utterance often becomes the class joke: Students X and Y always talk about their cats; student Z always spends his free time watching TV. The student who seldom travels may get plenty of practice saying "Je suis restée chez moi" ["I stayed home"] during each personalized, Monday morning warm-up, but if she is not guided to talk about events outside of her personal experience, she will limit her language practice, relying on a narrow range of tried and true phrases, while exercising little reflection or creativity. In other words, by asking students to shift their focus from themselves to someone else, we may also give them reasons to generate new ideas, to exercise more grammatical and lexical forms, and to develop sensitivity to the needs of their listeners.

This idea of stepping away from purely personal and subjective content in speech applies to writing as well. To heighten an awareness of audience needs in writing tasks, teachers may seed the assignment with an implied reader and narrative function: "You are writing an e-mail to a student who wants to sublet your apartment this summer" or "You are writing a letter of complaint to a mail-order company." Too often though, textbooks and teachers de-emphasize the importance of narrative function and implied reader by assigning topics such as "Describe your typical week to a French friend." If the topic were "Describe your typical week" — with no identified reader — would the written outcome be any different? The fictive "French friend" will likely have little effect on the tone or content of the writing.

With a minor readjustment, an assignment requiring the same linguistic functions and tools could become more challenging, creative, and appealing to the writer, the implied reader, and the very real teacher and peer editor(s). The simple modifications proposed below create a degree of personal separation between the student/writer and the content of his/her text. When students take a step away in tone, perspective, and/or task, they assume a critical distance, which enhances awareness of narrative function and audience. This distance also allows students to use creative writing skills, which transcend the restraints of their proficiency level. Figure 1 shows examples of how a generic writing task might be revised with one degree of critical distance in mind.
Attention to tone, perspective, and narrative function reinforces the crucial matter of reader/writer dynamics, so often forgotten by students whose primary goal in writing may be, as Flower and Hayes have noted (1981), to complete the assignment (see summary and discussion in Lee & Van Patten, 1995, Chapter 11 and p. 216 in particular). Writing with a degree of critical distance in mind, students will be more aware of their intended effect on the reader, real or implied.

This “one-degree rule” may be applied to speaking and writing tasks at any level. Even while practicing sentence-length utterances in beginning language classes, students may exercise creativity by stepping away from purely personal subject matter. Consider the following analysis of a personalized activity redesigned with creative personalization.

**Case 1: The Family Tree**

About 5 weeks into the semester, students in an elementary-level, college French class have begun to learn vocabulary associated with families and social events. The students and instructor have reviewed a vocabulary list and co-constructed an interactive presentation of possessive adjectives (ma mère, mon frère/my mother, my brother) using as context a family tree provided in the book, or a projected photograph of a well known family. So that everyone has a chance to practice the vocabulary and the grammatical structure, the teacher pairs off students, instructing students to draw, then narrate their own family trees to their partners. The instructor circulates from group to group, conversing with the students and cueing error correction, particularly in the areas of the vocabulary and grammatical forms just learned. Once most groups have finished, the teacher has two or three students share their family trees with the whole class. The teacher is careful to involve the students who are not presenting, by asking questions such as “Is anyone else a twin?” or “Who else has more than five cousins?”

This type of activity — suggested in good language textbooks today, and practiced by many teachers, including the author of this article — is an example of what I see as well-intentioned overpersonalization. Certainly, the family tree activity is geared toward building oral proficiency. In fact, it addresses most of the five working hypotheses and corollaries delineated by Omaggio Hadley (1993, p. 77) to make a classroom conducive to proficiency goals. The family tree activity allows students to move beyond convergent practice, to express their own meaning. The small-group work encourages communication, while the teacher’s involvement during and after the group work guides students to focus on accuracy. While drawing a family tree is unlikely to take place in a casual conversation in the target

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**Figure 1**

**REVISI NG A TRADITIONAL WRITING TASK**

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<tr>
<th>Traditional writing task: “Describe the activities of your typical week to a French friend.”</th>
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<td><strong>Revisions to foster critical distance:</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Distance in tone:</strong> You are answering an e-mail from a Parisian friend who has asked what you’ve been doing. Your typical week has been fairly dull. The challenge: to write about a normal, uneventful week, making it sound interesting without fabricating events. In other words, write an engaging letter by making the ordinary sound fascinating.</td>
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<td><strong>Distance in perspective:</strong> A gossipy friend writes an e-mail to a mutual acquaintance, proclaiming that you have it easy, that everything in your life runs without a glitch. She uses the description of your typical week as evidence.</td>
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<td><strong>Distance in subject:</strong> [Requires a picture of a person:] Write about the typical week of the person depicted in this photo/fine-art reproduction/magazine clipping. Select the basic events of the week based on what you see in the picture. Do not explain the link between these events and the photo: The reader should be able to infer this connection by reading your composition.</td>
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<td><strong>Distance in task:</strong> [Small-group writing and peer-editing activity, based on a picture a person]</td>
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<td><strong>Whole class:</strong> Brainstorm about the activities the person in this photo might perform in a typical week, based on what the person is wearing and doing in the picture. [Teacher writes these on the board.]</td>
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<td><strong>Small groups:</strong> Describe the events of a typical week from the point of view of the person in the photo. Each group will base its description on the list of events noted on the board; however, each group will give its description a different tone: Group A will make these events sound fun; Group B will make these events sound boring; Group C will make these events sound mysterious; Group D will make these events sound important.</td>
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<td><strong>Homework:</strong> Use your cooperatively written description as the preliminary draft of your own composition.</td>
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culture, one might certainly engage in a discussion of family at some time. Narrating a family tree is a creative way to allow students with only a few weeks' language study to speak in sentences—even paragraphs—using plenty of the new vocabulary and structures. Finally, the act of drawing itself may be appealing to oft-neglected kinetic learners.

Although the family tree exercise responds to numerous proficiency goals and learning styles, it lacks attention to speaker/listener dynamics. It is fine, even desirable, to have one or two volunteer students present their own family trees to provide context in the presentation phase, as students and teacher work together to review the vocabulary and present the new grammar point. It is unwise, though, to require each student to present a family tree. Detailed discussions of family structure usually take place between close friends. More important, "family" is a touchy subject. Some students would rather not describe their family structure in a language class, for various, understandable reasons. Finally, even if all students are delighted to list their family members for the class, this detailed information is probably of marginal interest to the listeners.

To make the topic more gratifying to both speakers and listeners, I suggest a shift away from personal monologue, toward creative oral composition. Have students construct families out of a handful pictures (post cards, magazine photos) distributed to small groups at random. The humor and suspense make this basic listing activity more engaging. Just as important, by describing fictional family trees, students get needed practice using possessive adjectives other than mon, ma, and mes ["my"]. Finally, the scope of practiced vocabulary words grows as students create families with a wide range relatives (mothers-in-law, uncles, nieces) who do not necessarily exist in their real families.

By no means do I advocate striking the activities I describe as "overpersonalized" from the classroom. I am suggesting, though, that they not be overused. By asking students to step away from their personal experience in terms of tone, perspective, subject, or task, we allow them to apply critical thinking to otherwise basic tasks. Consider the examples in Figure 2, which illustrate how easily "standard personalization" may be transformed into "creative personalization." Once again, for the sake of argument, I have selected some extreme cases of "standard personalization" as a point of departure.

**Underpersonalization in Upper-Level Courses**

While students in lower-level courses may be asked to speak and write about themselves too often, the passage to upper-division courses (some time in the third year, in romance languages) often involves a solemn shedding of personal connection to the course content. Yet students' linguistic and critical thinking skills do not metamorphose overnight. I believe that more personalization is needed in these courses to heighten students' awareness of their individual linguistic challenges, the difference between their own personal and scholarly narrative voices, and the interdependence of the two — particularly in written expres-
sion. Overt treatment of form and meaning in guided, comparative analyses of student-generated writing samples helps students to recognize and further develop the capacity to write at different critical levels.

Case 2: Bread is Good

A student in my “French Novel on Film” course met with me to discuss a paper on which she had received a disappointing grade. Although she had devoted a great deal of time to writing and revising her work, the mistakes in form — French mistakes — were frequent and serious enough to obscure meaning. I found myself so busy deciphering the individual sentences, that I frequently lost the thread of her argument.

I selected one of the sentences in question and asked the student what she had meant to say — in English. She had no trouble articulating her idea. Then I asked her to translate her own corresponding French sentence, as written, back into English. She did so, almost immediately recognizing the shift in meaning generated by grammatical errors. Yet her English sentence was not terribly complex, the vocabulary either obvious or easily found in the scantiest of bilingual dictionaries. Nor was this bright student lazy or deficient in training. The student summed up her general frustration with the following enlightening remark, which I paraphrase: “I can’t seem to express myself in French. I think ‘This is the best bread I’ve ever tasted’ and I write, ‘Le pain est bon’ [The bread is good. or Bread is good].” The bread example was an accurate illustration of the types of mistakes the student had made throughout her paper. She had gone beyond circumlocution to a complete — yet unnecessary — rewriting of her ideas, even in many uncomplicated sentences.

We spent some time discussing what was lost in the

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<td>SELF-TRANSLATION EXERCISE</td>
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In-class writing  
A. Write a brief and engaging description of the film “Last Year at Marienbad,” in French, as if you were composing an entry for a video guide. (4-6 sentences)
B. Now write a similar entry in English, as if for an American video guide.

Analysis  
[Either in small groups or at home, students answer the following questions:]

- Is the tone of the entry the same (as lively, as critical, as persuasive) in both versions?
- Did the process of translating from French to English make you aware of any ambiguities in either portion of your description?
- Are there differences in the quantity and content of information included in each?
- Is the sentence structure the same in each? If so, could it be changed to read more smoothly?
- What grammatical structures and idioms might help you to communicate your ideas in French more effectively?
- What terms used in this course would allow you to express your ideas more clearly?

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<th>Figure 4</th>
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<td>PERSONAL AND CRITICAL RESPONSE WRITING</td>
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Part A. In the first part, describe your reaction to the film as you would describe it to a friend who might want to see it for pleasure or entertainment. What did you like and dislike about the film? How did it make you feel? What did it make you think about? Did it remind you of other films you have seen, or books you have read? What details do you find important/confusing/intriguing?

Part B. Discuss why this film might be considered worthy of study in a film class. Try to focus on one or two of the same examples or details described in Part A. How do the techniques we have studied contribute to the scenes you find especially powerful? What would make the film compelling to viewers who do not necessarily share your tastes or personal connection to the content? Do the sequences you did not like seem to serve a purpose? Do they raise important questions about the film’s style or message?
translation from her own model sentence “This is the best bread I’ve ever tasted,” to “the bread is good.” The student recognized that the precision indicated by “this” bread, blurs to “the bread” or “bread” in general. The specific speech acts (ranking, comparing, expressing an opinion) soften to a broad declaration. Moreover, what is lost in the transition from “This is the best bread I’ve ever tasted” to “The bread is good” is the writer’s subjectivity and enthusiasm. On a more academic level, she has “lost” the reader as well.

During such conversations, the teacher often invokes the translation taboo: “You have to think in French; don’t translate from English to French.” Yet do we really expect a student struggling to write a paper in a 300 or 400-level course to compose by thinking in the target language? In fact, “le pain est bon” represents the sort of sentence this student could produce automatically in conversation, that is, by “thinking in French” rather than resorting to translation or analysis of the language. What we want students to write, however, usually demands care and sophistication beyond that which students have mastered for spontaneous, spoken discourse. “Think in French” is actually misleading shorthand for a complicated thought process: “Be aware that translating your ideas directly from English to French will produce mistakes and difficulties of understanding; do not translate sentence structures and idioms directly from French into English; think of how a French speaker would express this in writing.” Paradoxically, asking students not to think in English may be interpreted as asking them not to think at all.

Since it is useful to point out the problems of faulty translation from English to the target language when going over drafts and final papers, it would be even more beneficial to alert students to this conflict in their own writing early and throughout the semester, through brief, guided, comparative self-translation exercises.

Comparative Self-Translation

The taboo against using grammar-translation as a methodology in a communicatively oriented program has led many of us to eschew translation of any kind, in any classroom context. We may be doing students a disservice, though, by imposing a pedagogical philosophy geared toward the development of (oral) proficiency, on the highly reflective and cognitive task of composing and revising papers in a second language. Writing and editing, even in one’s native language, require strong doses of critical thinking and self-consciousness — elements that would undermine the goals of more spontaneous productive tasks, such as role-playing and journal writing. For anglophone students, it is often the contrast of English utterances with their rewritings in the target language that best illustrates the dangers of overgeneralized translation. My conversation with the student mentioned above led me to use “self-translation” as a means of diagnosing individual problems of interference from English. I must emphasize that this is not a method for teaching composition, but rather an exercise geared to build awareness of the writing and editing process. Figure 3 provides an example of a self-translation exercise designed for students in a 300-level “Introduction to French Cinema Course.”

Personal Response and Critical Response

Response writing allows students to devote attention to the content of their utterances without getting snagged on form. Normally, students write a brief response essay immediately after having read or viewed an assignment. Whether the topic is completely open-ended or guided, teachers comment almost exclusively on content in their feedback, saving strict attention to accuracy for the more formal papers.

Most teachers have little trouble accepting some mistakes of form that ensue when students are freed from a grammar grade. But how many, put off by too many comments like “I thought Cocteau’s Beast looked like a Chia Pet,” direct students away from expressing their personal opinions about the text or film? This was my initial reaction upon reading the above comment, which I quote from a response paper in a Literature in Translation course. Nonetheless, I believe that students should express their personal reactions to texts and films, for at least two reasons. First, we watch films and read novels for pleasure. Why devalue the pleasure of reading, simply because the academic context guides students to think beyond this initial, personal connection to literature? Second, an effective way to illustrate the difference between a personal and a scholarly response to a text, is to contrast the two. Students who express both types of responses develop a habit of registering their own connection (or lack thereof) to a text, and at the same time realize their potential to write at a more critical, discursive level. Without lengthening the assignment, teachers may guide students to compose two types of responses to a single text (Figure 4).

Conclusion

The notions of form, content, and their intersections certainly deserve further attention in both theoretical and practical terms. The preceding pages have considered these concepts from only two of many revealing, pedagogical points of juncture, that is, where personalization and the productive skills intersect. In the interest of building cohesion between lower- and upper-division courses, I have examined each through the same lens, an approach that illustrates, I believe, that the learners themselves do not provide the only link between such courses.

In guiding students in all courses to communicate
effectively, to think critically, and to write both creative and scholarly essays, teachers need not prohibit them from speaking about themselves, nor from expressing personal, emotional reactions to works studied. It is important, however, that language learners consider listener/read needs when attempting speaking and writing tasks. They should also develop an ability to distinguish between their personal and scholarly reactions to materials studied; this would include an understanding of the modes of expression appropriate to each.

Ultimately, the degree to which personalization promotes a good classroom ambiance and interactive speaking, listening, reading, and writing depends on the individuals in the class and general classroom dynamics, which vary from group to group. With these notions in mind, we may help to smooth the transition from traditional "language" to traditional "content" courses as we foster a spirit of reflection, analysis, and creativity from the most basic through the most advanced courses.

References


