

Improving the Image by Expanding the Mission of Foreign Language Teaching in the U.S.



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Introduction

When reading the *NECTFL Review's* call for papers on "Rectifying and Improving the Image of Foreign Language Learning in the United States," two things struck me about this title. It assumes that something in foreign language learning is askew and needs to be fixed, and it brings to the forefront the word 'image,' a term generally not associated with education. If images are projected, then images of foreign language learning are projected onto learners by a variety of factors, but predominantly by our teaching, our curricula, and our students' overall classroom experience. What is askew is painfully experienced by many higher education colleagues teaching languages other than Spanish in the form of shrinking programs, especially in languages such as German and Russian. Recent data suggest that overall foreign language enrollments in higher education have fallen from 16 percent of total student enrollments in 1960 to 8 percent in 2002 (American Council of Education, 2002). More detailed statistics are available for the K-12 level where overall enrollments have grown over the last ten years. However, the increase has disproportionately benefited Spanish with most other languages experiencing decreases in number of students. (Draper and Hicks, 2002).¹

Foreign language teachers in the U.S. rarely enjoy the position of their counterparts in many other parts of the world, where language study is an integral element of the curriculum. In German, for example, retirement has had a considerable impact on language programs, both at the high school and the college level. In southern New England, a number of school districts phased out the teaching of German in the 1980s. With few notable exceptions, the enrollment picture for German at the college level is not too promising either. The American Association of Teachers of German (AATG), the professional organization of German teachers in the U.S., is fighting a decline in membership, despite a high level of activity supporting the profession.

Our field is affected by other factors as well. Most students take languages for a relatively short time with all languages experiencing significant attrition rates after students have completed their foreign language requirements. According to the 2000 ACTFL survey, of those who began language study in high school, 70% enrolled in the second year course, 35% in third year, and only 10.6% in fourth year (Draper and Hicks, 2002, p. 20).²

Another factor may be lack of institutional support. It seems that quite a few of today's decision-makers are apparently

dissatisfied with their own classroom foreign language experience some thirty or so years ago. For many of them, still, language learning amounts to grammar, pattern drills, and memorization. Unfortunately, these perceptions often supersede any awareness of ongoing innovations in the field of foreign language teaching. For many of these individuals, decisions are based on the assumption that classroom foreign language learning is still unappealing and ineffective; and language education issues may be adversely affected as a result. Most recently, in 2001, the controversy at Drake University in Iowa received national attention. Led by its president, a former language educator, the university closed its entire language department in favor of a study abroad-based approach. The university cited the inefficiency of local language instruction as the major reason for its decision (Schneider, 2001). How our students, the public, and the private sector see us must be of concern. One would not expect languages to retreat in the current period of globalization. Yet, this is precisely what is happening in the U.S.

External Factors Affecting Our Profession

One should distinguish between external and internal factors that are affecting the

image of foreign language learning. One external factor is the U.S.'s geographic insularity. Two huge oceans separate it from much of the rest of the world creating a perception of isolation from other languages. At the same time, however, the influx of non-English-speaking immigrants even into rural areas of the country remains high. Furthermore, the U.S.'s increased dominance in world political, economic, and military affairs over the last decade has contributed to the advance of English as the primary language of international contact. The limited coverage of international news among mainstream U.S. media is another external factor that affects the status of foreign languages in the U.S. today. Foreign news reports, particularly on television, tend to focus on negatively charged events, such as wars and disasters. The profession has limited or no control over these external factors, but several internal factors can be addressed.

Factors Internal to the Profession: The Problem

If one were to single out one problem at the root of foreign language professional concerns in the U.S. today, it would be our isolated position within the curriculum. What we do is often seen by others in the educational enterprise as so radically different from their fields that relationships and connections to languages are not even considered. Yet there are many connections not only with other fields in the liberal arts but also in the sciences, business, and engineering. For some time the profession contributed to this aura of 'exceptionalism' by narrowing the focus of its mission to the teaching of language and literature as opposed to a broader approach, which includes cultural, social, political, and economic aspects.

Foreign language instruction finds itself at a juncture at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As noted above, internationalization is affecting people around the world in ways never seen before. For Americans in all walks of life—economic, cultural, social, and political—the odds of dealing with individuals whose native language and cultural values are other than their own are going up. Teaching intercultural competence is widely recognized as an important objective in education. Language educators need to make the case convincingly that their discipline is key to creating a culturally competent speaker. Kramsch (1998) speaks of the interculturally competent speaker as one who "has been taught culture as it is mediated through language, not as it is studied by social sci-

entists and anthropologists" (p. 31). Despite strong reform movements, particularly the proficiency movement of the 1980s and the standards movement of the 1990s, it appears that the teaching of culture has not found a satisfactory place in most curricula even though the need to do so is widely recognized (Berman, 2002; Byrnes, 2002).

Has the time come to reallocate more instructional time to the teaching of culture? As foreign language educators we are well aware of the inseparable link between language and culture, yet in the classroom we too often treat the two as separate entities. Whatever is taught under the rubric 'culture' is too often seen as ancillary and relegated to a secondary status, only to be dealt with after the language aspects of the lesson have been covered. In her summary of the project "Voices From The Field: Experiences and Beliefs of Our Constituents," Dvorak (1995) suggests that that cultural understanding may be the major motivation for students' taking a foreign language class. They may be more interested in understanding culture than in developing a high level of linguistic proficiency, do not seem to make the language vs. culture distinction, and are looking for intercultural skills, which will help them interact with their foreign counterparts. Dvorak (1995) writes:

First, they [the students] tended not to speak of culture and language in separate breaths, but rather as constructs that are tightly interconnected and develop together: they typically "spoke of how their awareness and understanding of other culture and viewpoints grew alongside their developing language abilities" (Hall & Davis, p. 20, emphasis mine).

Second, in many cases, whenever these learners talked about culture, they did so in the context of talking to and interacting with people (Barnes, Terrio & Knowles, Young & Kimball). For these learners, it appears that learning about culture is indeed not so much about information as it is about developing the capacity and/or getting the opportunity to get to know and interact with people from other cultures in their language. In other words, interactions with others, which themselves result from the development of functional language proficiencies, are the primary means by which students learn about another culture. The pathway is not language-culture, but language-people-culture (p. 243).

Despite a long debate about culture, there is no clear consensus on either its

definition or what role it is to take in the curriculum. Most of us have more to offer students than our literary expertise and simply teaching the spoken and written word. Language teachers are cultural experts and are in a unique position to serve not only as linguistic but also cultural mediators for our students. Especially at the early levels of instruction specific provisions should be created in the curriculum to create a minimum level of knowledge about the country's geography; history; and political, economic, social, and cultural current events. In addition, a minimum level of awareness of intercultural communication issues should be dealt with. I would consider it sound practice to 'sacrifice' language instructional time in favor of raising the cultural competence of our students. Too often, these topics are not introduced systematically until the advanced levels when most of the students we had in our beginning classes are no longer with us. In an article examining the effects of the spread of English on language learning in the U.S., Geisler (2002) makes a strong case for expanding the role of the language educator to include that of cultural mediator. He writes: "By reclaiming the cultural expertise we have ceded to other areas of the curriculum, foreign language departments across the country can help a global freeze and other gloomy forecasts" (p. 11).

Solutions: Communicating Goals, Developing Cultural Competence, Enhancing Interdisciplinary Connections

The *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (1999) present the most comprehensive set of guidelines, which address many of the issues mentioned above and which should elevate the image of foreign language learning in the current era of educational reform. One of their most significant contributions has been the renewed emphasis on the interpersonal aspect of language learning. James (1998) calls for a much more vigorous implementation of the principles embodied by the standards in higher education. I would like to highlight three areas in which increased efforts on the part of the profession might bring long-term benefits for the place of foreign languages in the curriculum.

First, instructional goals should be articulated more clearly to students and should be used actively in promoting languages. Students need a clearer 'roadmap' from the first day of language instruction. Language learners are embarking on what we hope will be a life-long journey toward linguistic and cultural compe-

tence. But for the most part we do not chart the course for them very well through clear description of desired outcomes at various mileposts along the way. As stated earlier, our present 'roadmaps' for achieving cultural competence are rather unreliable. The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines have undergone a two-decade long process of refinement and provide an excellent basis for articulating linguistic goals. However, as the name states, they are guidelines and not a one-size-fits-all formula. In order to be meaningful to the student, the guidelines need to be 'localized,' i.e., adapted to the unique circumstances of a particular language program (number of instructional hours, student body, etc.) and need to be expressed in terms of concrete situations a student can master at particular proficiency levels.

The lack of clearly articulated goals could also be a by-product of communicative language teaching. It would be interesting to survey foreign language teachers on what they do on the first day of Language 101. I suspect many (and I am guilty as charged) 'dive' in right away and use the target language as much as possible. First impressions are critical and we want our students to know that they are about to learn to communicate in the language. Many instructors will consider a dynamic first class taught in the target language one of the best ways to set the tone for a communication-based class. Yet, once the target-language-only approach has been established, it seems to become more difficult to interrupt the flow of immersion-centered teaching and to step back and talk—mostly in English—about goals and desired outcomes. Perhaps more detailed roadmaps should be given not only at the beginning of instruction but be reiterated and reaffirmed continuously through the language learning process.

Second, the teaching of intercultural cultural competence should receive more attention. Developing cultural competence standards is an effort comparable in size to that of the Standards for Foreign Language Learning and the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. Even language-specific guidelines, such as the Standards for Learning German, deal with a variety of cultural aspects but fall short of addressing the underlying values and beliefs of the culture.³

One would think the foreign language educator's bilingual/bicultural background makes her or him ideally suited to take on the role of cultural mediator. But there are two major stumbling blocks to effective implementation of the mediator role. One is a belief permeating our profession that

cultural competence is an automatic byproduct of effective language teaching and therefore does not require much specific attention. The other is a lack of training for language teachers in the social science based area of intercultural communication.

The critical incident or culture assimilator technique characteristic of culture instruction in the social sciences could be used to spark students' curiosity about cross-cultural encounters. The cultural assimilator focuses on the values and core beliefs of a culture. Students are presented a scenario in which an American abroad is interacting with host country nationals, and experiences puzzling, culturally conditioned behavior. Students given several possible explanations for the behavior, only one of which is culturally logical. Good culture assimilators conclude with detailed feedback on each of the explanations given. The critical incident technique can be a successful tool to prepare students for study abroad and internship experiences, yet it has received only limited attention in foreign language education (Knop, 1976; Seelye, 1984; Williams, 1982). Rather than stating an observation of cultural behavior, this approach examines the underlying beliefs of a culture and seeks explanations of how these beliefs came about. An example would be the common observation that Germans often keep doors closed both at home and in the office, contributing to the perception that they may not be friendly or sociable. In fact, the closed doors are merely a manifestation of a strong need for privacy, which ranks high on the scale of core cultural values in Germany and can, at least partially, be attributed to its high population density.

In her article "The Cultural Component of Language Teaching," Kramsch (1995) points out that historically the elusive term 'culture' has referred to two different ways of defining a social community.

The first definition comes from the humanities; it focuses on the way a social group represents itself and others through its material productions, be they works of art, literature, social institutions, or artifacts of everyday life, and the mechanisms for their reproduction and preservation through history. The second definition comes from the social sciences: it refers to what educators like Howard Nostrand call the 'ground of meaning,' the attitudes and beliefs, ways of thinking, behaving and remembering shared by members of that community (p. 83).

Naturally, language educators traditionally have built curricula according to the humanities-based definition of culture. The teaching of culture grounded in the social science based definition has been almost exclusively the domain of organizations outside of education, such as intercultural training programs, which prepare business people or Peace Corps volunteers, for example, for overseas stays. Language training is often limited or non-existing in these programs. It appears that the two traditions outlined above have very little influence on each other. Recently, one voice from the intercultural training field called on its constituents to pay much more attention to cultural learning mediated through the foreign language (Fantini, 1999). Likewise, the culture debate among foreign language educators might benefit from incorporating experiential learning techniques such as the culture assimilator into the foreign language classroom. These techniques fit squarely into the parameters set by the standards. Some materials for teaching underlying cultural values and beliefs are already available for French (Nostrand, Grundstrom, and Singerman, 1996) and German (Markowsky and Thomas 1995).

Third, it is critical for the image of foreign languages that language educators step out of their department and collaborate with colleagues in other disciplines by team-teaching courses with faculty from other disciplines, participating in non-language-focused discussion panels on international issues and establishing interdisciplinary degree programs. One of many possible models of interdisciplinary cooperation having the potential to enhance the image of foreign languages on campus is that of the University of Rhode Island, where a most unlikely alliance was established between languages and engineering. Developed and advanced by language faculty, this dual degree program leads to an integrated B.A. in French, German, or Spanish and a B.S. in one of the engineering disciplines. The visibility of this program has brought a tremendous number of new majors to the three languages. Other past efforts at the college level include the Languages-Across-the-Curriculum movement of the late 1980s and 1990s which focused on interdisciplinary collaboration between languages and other humanities fields.

In summary, our field has undertaken many important steps to ensure that it projects a positive image to learners and the general public. The standards are a strong first move toward ensuring the accountability and professionalism nec-

essary for such a positive image, and higher education foreign language programs would benefit from stronger acceptance of the curricular framework reflected by the standards. Hopefully, the profession will pursue all possible angles to increase recognition within education and beyond. The three directions outlined above—better articulation of goals to learners, an expanded culture curriculum with a stronger experiential learning focus, and increased collaboration with other disciplines—have the potential to rectify and improve the image of foreign language learning. If there is one hurdle all of these efforts face in higher education, however, it is the reward structure of colleges and universities, an external factor frequently overlooked in discussions of the problems facing our discipline. Too often, pressure on faculty members is such that work outside the traditional boundaries of the field is not sufficiently rewarded or even penalized. If administrations truly support an expanded mission of foreign language teaching, teachers will follow and the profession, along with its image, will benefit.

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Footnotes

1. This national survey of foreign language enrollments in K-12 was commissioned by ACTFL, comparing data from the years 2000 and 1994. In grades 7-12, Spanish enrollments increased by 3%. Most other languages showed either reduced enrollments or remained unchanged.
2. This data is for all language enrollments in grades 9-12. The report states figures rather than percentages. The figures are: Level 1:1,333,626; Level 2: 797,800; Level 3: 346,200; Level 4: 120,231.
3. See Standards for Learning German. In: *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century: Including Chinese, Classical Languages, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish*. Lawrence, KS: The National Standards Project, 1999, p. 241-282.