

## REFORMING THE FOREIGN<sup>1</sup> LANGUAGE CURRICULUM FOR A GLOBAL WORLD

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### **Abstract**

*Globalization and the digital revolution present opportunities and challenges that demand a new kind of university graduates. These contemporary realities call for more robust, relevant and articulated learning that can prepare citizens to live, compete, collaborate, and succeed in an increasingly interconnected world. Beyond the traditional linguistic and literary focus, this paper examines curricular and pedagogical innovations, as well as technology tools that can transform university foreign language education, and thereby help prepare students for success in today's global workplace. In lieu of the standard configuration of university foreign language programmes, in which lower-division language courses feed into upper-division literature courses, the paper proposes a unified, coherent language-and-content curriculum that situates language study in cultural, historical, geographical, and cross-cultural frames. This model systematically incorporates transcultural content and translingual reflection at every level; it provides students the means to understand geo-political, economic, and technological issues related to globalization; and ultimately enhances their cultural awareness as well as their translingual and transcultural competence. It also takes advantage of the amazing advances in information and communication technologies, which expand learning opportunities, engage learners' interest and interaction, create new learning scenarios, and improve instruction. This curricular transformation will provide opportunities for creativity and innovation in foreign language study. It will also create opportunities for cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary collaborations between foreign language and literature faculty and faculty in other disciplines by combining the study of language and literature with non-literary material. These transformations will not only strengthen the foreign language departments and the*

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<sup>1</sup> Because of the controversy surrounding the epithet "foreign" in the term "foreign language," the term "modern language," "world language" or "Languages Other Than English" are often preferred but these are not completely devoid of controversies or problems either. For the purpose of this paper, the term "foreign language" refers to any language that is not native to the speaker.

*entire university curriculum, but they will also improve the quality of professional and intellectual life.*

**Keywords:** *curriculum reform, foreign languages, globalization, information technology, translingual and transcultural competence*

### **Résumé**

La mondialisation et la révolution numérique présentent des opportunités et des défis qui exigent un nouveau type de diplômés universitaires. Ces réalités contemporaines exigent un apprentissage plus solide, pertinent et articulé qui peut préparer les citoyens à vivre, à rivaliser, à collaborer et à réussir dans un monde de plus en plus interconnecté. Au-delà de l'orientation linguistique et littéraire traditionnelle, cet article examine les innovations de programme d'études et de pédagogie, ainsi que les outils technologiques qui peuvent transformer l'enseignement universitaire des langues étrangères et ainsi aider à préparer les étudiants à réussir sur le lieu de travail mondial d'aujourd'hui. A la place de la configuration standard des programmes universitaires de langues étrangères selon lesquels les cours de langue du premier cycle alimentent les cours de littérature du cycle supérieur, cet article propose un programme unifié et cohérent de langue et de contenu qui situe l'étude des langues dans un contexte culturel, historique, géographique et interculturel. Ce modèle intègre systématiquement un contenu transculturel et une réflexion translinguistique à tous les niveaux; il fournit aux étudiants les moyens de comprendre les enjeux géopolitiques, économiques et technologiques liés à la mondialisation; et il améliore éventuellement leur conscience culturelle ainsi que leur compétence translinguistique et transculturelle. Il tire également parti des progrès incroyables des technologies de l'information et de la communication qui élargissent les possibilités d'apprentissage, suscitent l'intérêt et l'interaction des apprenants, créent de nouveaux scénarios d'apprentissage et améliorent l'enseignement. Cette transformation du programme d'études offrira des opportunités de créativité et d'innovation dans l'étude des langues étrangères. Il créera également des opportunités de collaborations interdisciplinaires entre les enseignants de langues et de littératures étrangères et leurs collègues d'autres disciplines en combinant l'étude de la langue et de la littérature avec des textes non-littéraires. Ces transformations renforceront non seulement les départements de langues étrangères et l'ensemble du cursus universitaire, mais elles amélioreront également la qualité de la vie professionnelle et intellectuelle.

**Mots-clés:** *réforme du programme d'études, langues étrangères, mondialisation, technologie de l'information, compétence translinguistique et transculturelle*

## **Introduction**

Globalization and the digital revolution, present opportunities and challenges that demand a new kind of university graduates. These contemporary realities call for a more robust, relevant and articulated learning that can prepare citizens to live, compete, collaborate, and succeed in an increasingly interconnected world.

In their “Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World: Modern Language Association Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages,” Michael Geisler et al. (2007) emphasized the pressing necessity to reform the university foreign language curriculum by making translingual and transcultural competence the goal of language learning, by designing more creative and engaging pedagogy, and by instituting interdisciplinary collaboration between foreign language education and other disciplines. Succinctly put, the goal is

a higher education system that embraces the distinctive educational benefits of studying foreign languages and cultures in developing the powers of the intellect and the imagination, the ability to reflect on one’s place in the world with depth and complexity, and understanding of the degree to which culture and society are created in language (Pratt et al. 2008: 288).

In a highly competitive world and extremely dynamic global economy, it is imperative to undertake curricular transformations that will make foreign language education more relevant to the overall needs of contemporary global citizens. Beyond the traditional linguistic and literary focus, instructors must explore all available resources, including new content, functional curricula, pedagogical innovations, and technology in order to train students to become effective leaders in a fast-changing world marked by interconnectedness.

In view of the foregoing, this article examines the challenges and opportunities facing university foreign language study in a global world using the following research questions: first, how can curricular

transformations in university foreign language education enhance learning experiences and prepare students for success in today's global workplace? Second, what types of interdisciplinary and cross disciplinary collaborations can be established between the language departments and other departments to provide curricular innovation? Third, how can an enriched foreign language curriculum strengthen the language departments? And, finally, what role can technology play in making foreign language study more innovative, engaging, interactive, and relevant to emerging trends?

### **Why Study Foreign Languages?**

The importance of learning foreign languages and cultures cannot be overemphasized. Knowing other languages, including Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish--brings opportunities. Whatever language we learn, it makes a difference in how we see the world, and in how the world sees us<sup>2</sup>. It enables us to discover new worlds, which expands our personal horizons and transforms us into responsible citizens. The linguistic and cultural competence enables us to communicate in different languages and understand other cultures; it prepares us for a wide range of careers in a global world, and thus becomes a means to a competitive edge.

According to a 2004 Harvard University report, in a fast-changing world, students need a deeper understanding of the principles of science and a far greater grasp of international affairs, which require stronger foreign language skills and significant international knowledge for graduates, who must be 'globally competent' (8, 91-97; Stewart, 2005: 229-230). In fact, the National Security Language

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<sup>2</sup> The French Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, for instance, lists ten good reasons to learn French: it is a world language, a language for learning other languages, the other language of international relations, a language that opens up the world, a language for the job market, for travel, for higher education; it is the language of culture, of love and reason, a language that is fun to learn. The complete text of "Ten Good Reasons to Learn French" is available at [www.diplomatie.gouv.fr](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr) (Accessed on 03-03-2021).

Initiative (NSLI) was introduced in 2006 by former US President George W. Bush on the premise that “foreign language skills are essential to engaging foreign governments and peoples, especially in critical world regions, to promote understanding, convey respect for other cultures, and encourage reform” (www.state.gov - Accessed 03-03-2021). In addition to ensuring economic competitiveness and national security interests, these skills foster the development of cosmopolitanism by making learners “less ethnocentric, less patronizing, less ignorant of others, less Manichaeian in judging other cultures, and more at home with the rest of the world” (Yankelovich, 2005: 14).

One of the most popular pedagogies in foreign language learning is the communicative approach<sup>3</sup>, which views “language learning as best brought about by involving learners actively in communication related to real-life contexts” (Adamson, 2004: 609). A closely related method is task-based instruction, which focuses on the use of authentic language and on asking students to do meaningful tasks<sup>4</sup> using the target language. This has proven to be highly effective in foreign language education because it involves the learner directly with the language being taught via cognitively engaging activities that reflect authentic and purposeful use of language, resulting in pleasurable, effective, and transformative language-learning experiences.

In lieu of a specific method or approach, B. Kumaravadivelu<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Learning to communicate through interaction in the target language, by linking classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom using role-play, interviews, information gap, games, language exchanges, surveys or pair-work.

<sup>4</sup> Tasks include visiting a doctor, conducting an interview, or calling customer service for help.

<sup>5</sup> In his award-winning book, *Cultural Globalization and Language Education* (New Haven, CT.: Yale UP, 2008), Kumaravadivelu presents pedagogic principles and classroom strategies for raising global cultural consciousness in the language learner.

proposed an eclectic strategic framework for foreign language teaching that maximizes learning opportunities based on local context and learners' specific needs, interests, and abilities; facilitates negotiated interaction among learners; fosters language awareness by raising the learners' sensitivity to language and its role in human life; contextualizes linguistic input in order to provide essential pragmatic clues to meaning; integrates interrelated and mutually reinforcing language skills; raises cultural consciousness; and ensures social relevance (1994: 32). Foreign language instructors can then draw from this pedagogical reservoir to design customized methods that fit their specific needs and situations.

### **Training Global Citizens**

Globalization and information technology are undoubtedly the most powerful forces shaping our world, and in recent times, they have had tremendous effects on virtually all institutions of learning worldwide. Accordingly, appropriate educational policies have been enacted and organizational changes have been implemented in order to prepare learners for the opportunities and challenges of the modern age, which requires competence and understanding that transcend conventional geopolitical borders and cultures.

The heart of global education is empowering students to learn about the interdependence of human society and enabling them to participate in shaping a better, shared future for our interconnected world through an acquisition of global learning, including critical and creative thinking, ethical behavior, knowledge in world regions and international affairs, foreign language competence, intercultural communication, and global trends in science and technology. This curriculum emphasizes workforce training, information technologies for greater efficiency and rising productivity, as well as economic competitiveness in global contexts, which will empower students to meet the challenges of a global world (Byrnes, 2008: 286; Levin 2001<sup>6</sup>).

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<sup>6</sup> John S. Levin, *Globalizing the Community College: Strategies for Change in the*

As a central piece of this educational reform, the foreign language curriculum cannot be left behind, because “[t]he future is [...] multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual” (Stewart 2009: 182). Hence, Allan Goodman’s radical suggestion for producing effective global citizens:

Language learning [must be] offered to undergraduates as an integral part of their majors, allowing them to take general education or core classes in their majors--chemistry, business, or political science, for example--in the foreign language. Foreign language learning becomes integral to the students’ education as they speak, read, write, and listen to the language in the context of their broader academic interests. (611)

The key signature of Goodman’s model is the immersive, intensive foreign language experience, which makes foreign language central to university education, regardless of the academic major. A similar model is Middlebury’s international and global studies programme that encourages students to transcend the confines of their own backgrounds and upbringing, apprehend the world through others’ eyes, and in the process become more informed global citizens. Its central components include advanced competency in a foreign language, knowledge of an academic discipline’s paradigm, interdisciplinary understanding of a specific geographic region, understanding of inter-regional relationships in a global context, deep engagement in critical thinking about global issues, and study abroad ([www.middlebury.edu](http://www.middlebury.edu) - Accessed 10/17/2020). The end product is university graduates who can negotiate academic and workplace culture and solidify professional-level language skills.

### **Foreign Language Curricular Reforms for Translingual and Transcultural Competence**

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*Twenty-First Century*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001.

Regardless of the varying and sometimes conflicting<sup>7</sup> views on foreign language methodologies, and irrespective of the mission of the educational programme, the ultimate goal of language learning is the ability to communicate with others and to recognize a language's "relation to cultural and literary traditions, cognitive structures, and historical knowledge" (Geisler et al., 2007: 236). All these aspects, namely, meaning, mentality, and worldview, must be implemented concurrently such that learners attain the linguistic and cultural competence required for acceptable understanding and appreciation of people and their communities.

Given the inalienable relationship<sup>8</sup> of language to culture and literature, and seeing that culture<sup>9</sup> occupies an essential place in foreign language education, teachers must establish connections between a language and its culture; they must pay closer attention to language as a meaning-making system within particular socio-cultural contexts. This will enhance students' cultural awareness, and ultimately facilitate the translingual and transcultural competence because,

[i]n the course of acquiring functional language abilities, students are taught critical language awareness, interpretation and translation, historical and political consciousness, social sensibility, and aesthetic perception. They acquire a basic knowledge of the history, geography, culture, and literature of the society or societies whose language they are learning (Geisler et al., 2007: 238).

The standard configuration of university foreign language programmes, in which lower-division language courses feed into upper-division literature courses, primarily focused on canonical literature,

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<sup>7</sup> Instrumentalist vs. constitutive views of language: one school of thought considers it as "a skill to use for communicating thought and information," another sees it "as an essential element of a human being's thought processes, perceptions, and self-expressions; and as such it is considered to be at the core of translingual and transcultural competence" (Geisler et al., 2007: 235).

<sup>8</sup> Chad Wellmon (2008: 292) maintains that "there is no culture without language and no language without culture."

<sup>9</sup> Culture being literary text, or better still, literary text being culture.



cannot produce the desired results. In order to achieve the goal of translingual and transcultural competence, content and language learning must be integrated into the overall course of study. It is a unified, coherent language-and-content curriculum that situates language study in cultural, historical, geographical, and cross-cultural frames; it systematically incorporates transcultural content and translingual reflection at every level, and students are able to comprehend and analyze the cultural narratives, including literary works, political rhetoric, journalism, humor, advertising, legal documents, performance, and music. Simply put, language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole, supported by alliances with other departments and expressed through interdisciplinary courses (Geisler et al., 2007: 236-238; Pratt et al. 2008: 290).

This language-based content instruction requires close collaboration between linguists and literary/cultural studies scholars to identify appropriate content-based speaking and writing tasks; specify the linguistic features needed to realize these tasks; and integrate the explicit instruction of these features into all courses in an articulated manner (Maxim 2014; Bousquet 2008: 304).

However, merely incorporating the study of topics beyond the traditional literary and cultural mainstays of the foreign language major cannot generate engaging global cultural content nor produce effective global citizens. For this curricular reform to be productive, it must enable and foster an ubiquitous use of multiple languages throughout the university curriculum, through cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary collaborations (Straight 2009: 625).

### **Cross-disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Collaborations**

In order to meet the changing needs of global learners, foreign language education must be reformed to provide students the means to understand geo-political, economic, and technological issues

related to globalization. Models include connecting foreign languages such as Spanish, French, German, Chinese, Japanese, etc., with disciplines like applied linguistics, socio-linguistics, art history, business studies, public health, environmental sustainability, technology, women's studies, Africana studies, film studies, performance studies, history, international relations, political science, sociology, or even economics. Such articulated connections produce courses like China: Culture, Economy and Commerce, Spanish for the Professions, Functional German, French for Specific Purposes, the Economics of Public Health in Francophone Africa and the Caribbean, Sustainability in French and Francophone Texts, or Japanese for Business and Technology, which entail instruction in business, culture, healthcare, engineering, and technology combined with field work, experiential learning, cultural events, excursions, and visits to area businesses-all conducted in foreign languages. Other models involve incorporating fields of knowledge outside of, but related to, foreign literature, by drawing on a range of faculty expertise across disciplines.

The resulting courses are intended to provide exciting opportunities for all interested students, majors/minors and non-majors alike, to integrate foreign language proficiencies in specific majors or professional fields. By enriching the foreign language curriculum, this curricular innovation will enable students to move beyond oral communicative competence, acquire global learning experiences, and take on leadership roles in cross-cultural and cross-linguistic work in the age of globalization and multiculturalism (Brantmeier 2008: 308). It will ultimately strengthen the language departments by fostering interdisciplinary collaboration between the foreign language departments and other disciplines.

### **Language-learning Technology: Key to Building Global Competence**

The ability to function effectively increasingly requires proficiency in a range of technology tools that can potentially expand learning

opportunities, engage learners' interest and interaction, create new learning scenarios in schools and improve instruction (Ainley et al. 2008; Richards, 2005: 60). Considering the amazing advances in information and communication technologies, foreign language educators cannot ignore the vital role that technology can play in enhancing the teaching and learning process.

Technology devices and applications such as the internet<sup>10</sup>, language labs<sup>11</sup>, computer-assisted language learning programmes, learning management systems such as Blackboard, Canvas, and Moodle, meeting platforms<sup>12</sup> such as Zoom, BlueJeans, and Google Hangouts, Web-based streaming video, network-based communication<sup>13</sup>, Screencast-O-matic<sup>14</sup>, as well as electronic resources such as gaming<sup>15</sup> and social media, have the potential of increasing interactivity

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<sup>10</sup> The internet has unarguably become the technology of choice, with students accessing authentic documents in the target language and interacting with native speakers in online chat rooms and engaging online language labs that incorporate live peer-to-peer discussions with native speakers, cultural exercises and discussion boards (Christian et al., 2005: 228).

<sup>11</sup> An example is *Study 700 Language Lab*, a software-only language lab that makes it easy for language instructors to launch applications and assignments for students, create playlists for guided and/or individualized learning activities, monitor student's screens for support and collaboration, and even manage web-based learning activities.

<sup>12</sup> Zoom, BlueJeans, and Google Hangouts are examples of technology that provide dynamic teaching/learning environment by enhancing interaction, collaboration, and real-time communication in and out of the language classroom, synchronously and asynchronously. The recent COVID-19 pandemic further underscores the importance of these digital tools.

<sup>13</sup> This includes e-mail, electronic mailing list, user groups, chat programs, blogs, wikis, and social networking sites that are specifically focused on (foreign) language learning and provide a wide range of educational resources (Blake, 2013: 154).

<sup>14</sup> An example of screen casting tools that allow language instructors to capture, store, and share whatever action is happening on their computer screen along with their voice narration, with numerous pedagogical applications.

<sup>15</sup> Researchers and curriculum developers have recently begun to turn to the gaming environment and the notion of play as a viable way to stimulate learning a second language by taking advantage of the full motivational powers afforded by the games (Blake, 2013: 163, 175).

exponentially, not only in a face-to-face instruction but also in the virtual classroom (Blake, 2013).

Evidently, technology has broad pedagogical benefits. First, it enhances language instruction through a combination of multidimensional materials and interactive resources that increase students' motivation, promote oral discussion opportunities, reduce learners' anxiety, and mitigate the negative effects of large foreign-language classes. Second, technology helps educators empower students with the foreign language competencies they need to thrive in an increasingly interconnected society. Third, technology-based language instruction is fun and interactive, especially for digital natives who engage and gain language confidence when technology is involved, particularly because instruction can be customized based on learners' individual levels. Specific advantages and/or possibilities include creating visual aids for teaching, improving access to online resources, reviewing and commenting on student work more efficiently, integrating video clips into presentations, and broadening choices for students to demonstrate learning<sup>16</sup>.

If wisely designed and properly incorporated into the curriculum, technology can play a major role in augmenting the opportunities for second language learners to receive target-language input, thus assisting second language development by enriching the learners' contact with the target language (Blake, 2013: 2, 22). The aforementioned digital tools can increase the range of options students may have for responding to and reflecting on course content and course experiences, in extremely innovative and novel ways. They are particularly interesting because they can ignite students' interest by linking learning to living - serving the ideals of today's demanding educational aims by spurring critical thinking, increasing national and

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<sup>16</sup> Learning can be demonstrated in a digital presentation by creating a Web site, using a hypermedia tool, such as Hyperstudio, or creating a stand-alone presentation.

global awareness and fostering a more informed and engaged citizenry.

### **Need for Reform of Foreign Language Curriculum**

There is a remarkable need for a strong global orientation and increased language and cultural competence. This ‘cultures and languages across the curriculum’ approach will require taking on commitments and responsibilities; it will entail trying hard stuff, but the outcomes promise to be rewarding.

The reformed foreign language curriculum will include a unified language-and-content curriculum with multiple opportunities for learners to improve their language and cultural competence, thus preparing them for the global world. They will be able to make meaningful use of their language competence in courses outside foreign language departments; there will be optimal use of technologies in order to better connect with current digital natives who live, work, and play in a digital globalized world; and learners will have the opportunity to immerse themselves in the culture of the chosen language (Klee, 2009: 618).

If thoughtfully designed, implemented, and supported, the reformed foreign language curriculum will be beneficial to all stakeholders: learners, teachers, institutions, and society at large in so many ways. First, it will produce “educated speakers who have deep translingual and transcultural competence” (Geisler et al., 2007: 237). Second, it will equip learners with intercultural communication and critical thinking skills that are essential to become successful world citizens. Third, it will “provide students with increased opportunities for second language development as well as allowing for deepened understanding of other disciplines” (Klee, 2009: 621). Fourth, it will provide foreign language learners the means to understand geopolitical, social, economic, and technological issues related to globalization. Finally, it will enable students to make a direct connection between their academic (foreign language) interests and

their future careers (long-term success). The end-result will be the development of “a citizenry capable of communicating with educated native speakers in their language” (Geisler et al., 2007: 243).

The proposed curricular transformation will provide opportunities for creativity and innovation in foreign language study. It will also create opportunities for interdisciplinary collaborations between foreign language and literature faculty and faculty in a wide range of disciplines such as media, area studies, performance studies, film, religion, political science, international relations, and art history by combining the study of language and literature with all kinds of non-literary material. These transformations are indispensable to overhaul the university foreign language curriculum, and thereby make it relevant to the realities of the globalized world and the information technology age. They will not only strengthen the foreign language and literature programmes as well as the entire university curriculum, but they will also improve the quality of professional and intellectual life.

A transformed unified foreign language curriculum that is open to interdisciplinary collaboration and technologies will give foreign language study its deserved centrality in the preparation of twenty-first century global citizens. This will be a great opportunity for foreign language study to thrive and be a major player in higher education. It therefore behooves foreign language teachers to undertake curricular overhaul that will integrate interdisciplinary and cross-curricular collaboration, career readiness, as well as the use of technology and the methodology of global and functional simulations (Magnin 2002).

The work of reforming and unifying the foreign language curriculum will require concerted efforts of all foreign language teachers, including those in literature, linguistics, socio-linguistics, applied linguistics, language pedagogy, professional disciplines, as well as information technology (Pratt et al. 2008: 290; Geisler et al., 2007: 240). We are obligated to prepare foreign language students to lead

in a world where translingual and transcultural competence allow people of all backgrounds to work together effectively; where knowledge grows through global interactions; and where economies and cultures are intertwined, and we must do it! (*Global Gateway*, <http://www.binghamton.edu> - Accessed on 03-07-2021).

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