

# Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World

MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages

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## Background

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The Modern Language Association supports a broad, intellectually driven approach to teaching language and culture in higher education. To study the best ways of implementing this approach in today's world, the MLA Executive Council established an Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, chaired by Mary Louise Pratt, who served as the association's president in 2003. The committee was charged with examining the current language crisis that has occurred as a result of 9/11 and with considering the effects of this crisis on the teaching of foreign languages in colleges and universities. It began working in 2004 and submitted its report to the Executive Council two years later. Committee members have made presentations at the MLA convention and at other public venues, including events sponsored by federal agencies, professional associations, and universities. This summary of the committee's and the Executive Council's deliberations offers background and context for the association's recommendations regarding the challenges and opportunities facing language study in higher education. While the recommendations address issues specific to the United States, they may be applicable to other contexts and countries.

In fulfilling its charge, the committee found itself immersed in a dynamic, rapidly changing environment marked by a sense of crisis around what came to be called the nation's language deficit. The United States' inability to communicate with or comprehend other parts of the world became a prominent subject for journalists, as language failures of all kinds plagued the United States' military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq and its efforts to suppress terrorism. Initiatives in critical languages began multiplying in educational institutions all over the United States. Government language schools scrambled to redefine priorities and mount new programs. New federal funds for language study appeared, most tied to defense and security needs. MLA data show that college and university enrollments in Arabic nearly doubled between 1998 and 2002, from 5,505 to 10,584 (Welles 9, table 1a). Shortages of qualified, trained teachers of critical languages became more acute than ever before. Legislative proposals to address the deficit in language and international expertise began appearing in Congress.

Not surprisingly, "the need to understand other cultures and languages" was identified by Daniel Yankelovich as one of five imperative needs to which higher education must respond in the next ten years if it is to remain relevant. "Our whole culture," Yankelovich says, "must become less ethnocentric, less patronizing, less ignorant of others, less Manichaeian in judging other cultures, and more at home with the

rest of the world. Higher education can do a lot to meet that important challenge.” In May 2005 Senator Daniel Akaka made a similar point: “Americans need to be open to the world; we need to be able to see the world through the eyes of others if we are going to understand how to resolve the complex problems we face.” In the current geopolitical moment, these statements are no longer clichés. The MLA is prepared to lead the way in the reorganization of language and cultural education around these objectives.

In the context of globalization and in the post-9/11 environment, then, the usefulness of studying languages other than English is no longer contested. The goals and means of language study, however, continue to be hotly debated. Divergent views concerning language and its many functions are reflected in differing approaches to the study of language. At one end, language is considered to be principally instrumental, a skill to use for communicating thought and information. At the opposite end, language is understood 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 translanguing and transcultural competence. While we use language to communicate our needs to others, language simultaneously reveals us to others and to ourselves. Language is a complex multifunctional phenomenon that links an individual to other individuals, to communities, and to national cultures.

Institutional missions and teaching approaches typically reflect either the instrumentalist or the constitutive view of language. Freestanding language schools and some campus language-resource centers often embrace an instrumentalist focus to support the needs of the students they serve, whereas university and college foreign language departments tend to emphasize the constitutive aspect of language and its relation to cultural and literary traditions, cognitive structures, and historical knowledge. Culture is represented not only in events, texts, buildings, artworks, cuisines, and many other artifacts but also in language itself. Expressions such as “the pursuit of happiness,” “liberté, égalité, fraternité,” and “la Raza” connote cultural dimensions that extend well beyond their immediate translation. As recent world events have demonstrated, deep cultural knowledge and linguistic competence are equally necessary if one wishes to understand people and their communities.

## Transforming Academic Programs

National defense and security agendas, which often arise during times of crisis, tend to focus the goals of language study narrowly. The standard configuration of university foreign language curricula, in which a two- or three-year language sequence feeds into a set of core courses primarily focused on canonical literature, also represents a narrow model. This configuration defines both the curriculum and the governance structure of language departments and creates a division between the language curriculum and the literature curriculum and between tenure-track literature professors and language instructors in non-tenure-track positions. At doctorate-granting institutions, cooperation or even exchange between the two groups is usually minimal or nonexistent. Foreign language instructors often work entirely outside

departmental power structures and have little or no say in the educational mission of their department, even in areas where they have particular expertise. Although we focus here on conditions that prevail in foreign language and literature programs, we also note that the two-tiered system exists elsewhere in the humanities—in English programs, for example, where composition and literary studies are frequently dissociated in parallel structural ways.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the frustration this rigid and hierarchical model evokes among language specialists who work under its conditions. Their antagonism is not toward the study of literature—far from it—but toward the organization of literary study in a way that monopolizes the upper-division curriculum, devalues the early years of language learning, and impedes the development of a unified language-and-content curriculum across the four-year college or university sequence. This two-track model endows one set of language professionals not only with autonomy in designing their curricula but also with the power to set the goals that the other set of professionals must pursue. In this model, humanists do research while language specialists provide technical support and basic training. The more autonomous group—the literature faculty—may find it difficult to see the advantages of sharing some of its decision-making power over the curriculum as a whole. We hope to convince this group that it is in our common interest to devise new models.

The two-tiered configuration has outlived its usefulness and needs to evolve. The critical moment in which language departments find themselves is therefore also an opportunity. Many factors in the world today make advanced study of languages and cultures appealing to students and vital to society. Replacing the two-tiered language-literature structure with a broader and more coherent curriculum in which language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole, supported by alliances with other departments and expressed through interdisciplinary courses, will reinvigorate language departments as valuable academic units central to the humanities and to the missions of institutions of higher learning. In our view, foreign language departments, if they are to be meaningful players in higher education—or, indeed, if they are to thrive as autonomous units—must transform their programs and structure. This idea builds directly on a transformation that has already taken place in the profession. In their individual scholarly pursuits and in their pedagogical practices, foreign language faculty members have been working in creative ways to cross disciplinary boundaries, incorporate the study of all kinds of material in addition to the strictly literary, and promote wide cultural understanding through research and teaching. It is time for all language programs in all institutions to reflect this transformation.

## The Goal: Translingual and Transcultural Competence

The language major should be structured to produce a specific outcome: educated speakers who have deep translingual and transcultural competence. Advanced language training often seeks to replicate the competence of an educated native speaker, a goal that postadolescent learners rarely reach. The idea of translingual and transcultural competence, in contrast, places value on the ability to operate between

languages. Students are educated to function as informed and capable interlocutors with educated native speakers in the target language. They are also trained to reflect on the world and themselves through the lens of another language and culture. They learn to comprehend speakers of the target language as members of foreign societies and to grasp themselves as Americans—that is, as members of a society that is foreign to others. They also learn to relate to fellow members of their own society who speak languages other than English.

This kind of foreign language education systematically teaches differences in meaning, mentality, and worldview as expressed in American English and in the target language. Literature, film, and other media are used to challenge students' imaginations and to help them consider alternative ways of seeing, feeling, and understanding things. In 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; the ability to understand and interpret its radio, television, and print media; and the capacity to do research in the language using parameters specific to the target culture.

## An Integrative Approach with Multiple Paths to the Major

The kind of curricular reform we suggest will situate language study in cultural, historical, geographic, and cross-cultural frames within the context of humanistic learning. We expect that more students will continue language study if courses incorporate cultural inquiry at all levels and if advanced courses address more subject areas. This means faculty members will have the opportunity to bring into the classroom the full breadth of their knowledge of the society about which they teach, including that society's languages and language variants, literatures, and cultures. Many colleges and universities have made a successful transition toward this broad understanding of language study, and we urge others to follow.

One possible model defines transcultural understanding as the ability to comprehend and analyze the cultural narratives that appear in every kind of expressive form—from essays, fiction, poetry, drama, journalism, humor, advertising, political rhetoric, and legal documents to performance, visual forms, and music. According to this model, which we present only as an example, to read a cultural narrative a student should:

- ◆ Achieve enough proficiency in the language to converse with educated native speakers on a level that allows both linguistic exchanges and metalinguistic exchanges (that is, discussion about the language itself).
- ◆ Have a solid command as well as an analytic knowledge of specific metaphors and key terms that inform culture.
- ◆ Understand how a particular background reality is reestablished on a daily basis through cultural subsystems such as:

- the mass media
- literary and artistic works as projection and investigation of a nation's self-understanding
- the social and historical narratives in literary texts, artistic works, the legal system, the political system, the educational system, the economic system, and the social welfare system
- local instances of major scientific and scholarly paradigms
- sports or other leisure activities, the cultural metaphors these have created, and their relation to the national imagination
- stereotypes, of both self and others, as they are developed and negotiated through texts
- symbols or sites of memory in the broadest sense, including buildings, historical figures, popular heroes, monuments, currency, culture-specific products, literary and artistic canons, landscapes, fashion, and cuisine
- major competing traditions such as views of the nation that are secularist or fundamentalist or religious
- local historiography

Language departments will need to undertake a similar mapping of content to produce unified, four-year curricula that situate language study in cultural, historical, geographic, and cross-cultural frames; that systematically incorporate transcultural content and translingual reflection at every level; and that organize the major around explicit, principled educational goals and expected outcomes. A curriculum should consist of a series of complementary or linked courses that holistically incorporate content and cross-cultural reflection at every level.

Only 6.1% of college graduates whose first major is foreign languages go on to attain a doctoral degree (Nat'l. Science Foundation); for those students and for others who enjoy literary studies, one path to the major should be through literature. But to attract students from other fields and students with interests beyond literary studies, particularly students returning from a semester or a year abroad, departments should institute courses that address a broad range of curricular needs. Most students studying abroad do not major in departments of languages and literatures, but they can be drawn to courses where they continue to develop their language skills and enrich their cultural knowledge. Interdisciplinary collaborative courses could fulfill both the needs of the students and the goals of the institution's program. Interdisciplinary courses are typically taught in English, but a credit-bearing discussion module taught in the target language can be added with the support of programs such as foreign languages across the curriculum. More important, faculty members participating in team-taught courses could be encouraged to lead these discussion sessions as part of their teaching load. This approach should appeal to administrators who wish to promote interdisciplinary courses, particularly those taught by several faculty members. Focused, for instance, on a period, an issue, or a literary genre, these courses would present an in-depth study of cross-cultural influences. Examples include courses on the Crusades in the Middle Ages; the Silk Road; literature and opera; the sonnet across four national literatures; turn-of-the-century Vienna, Paris, and

London; literature and science; and interconnections between Germany and the United States. In addition to attracting majors from other disciplines, such interdisciplinary team-taught courses would encourage learning communities, forge alliances among departments, and counter the isolation and marginalization that language and literature departments often experience on American campuses. To those who may think it unrealistic to expect collaboration involving language and literature teaching, we would point out that strategies in place at many institutions, like team teaching and linked courses, prove that such collaboration works.

## Collaboration and Governance: Transforming the Two-Tiered System

The new courses and programs we recommend should not be developed exclusively by tenure-track scholars trained primarily in literature. The work of revamping and unifying the language department curriculum can only be carried out through a sustained collaboration among all members of the teaching corps, including tenure-line faculty members and those with contingent and long-term appointments in all related fields, such as linguistics, literature, and language pedagogy. Faculty members trained in fields such as media, area studies, performance studies, film, religion, and art history are increasingly part of foreign language department hiring patterns. This trend, along with joint appointments between language departments and related departments and programs, supports the kind of change proposed here.

The presence of linguists and second language acquisition specialists on language department faculties is also an essential part of this vision. Linguists enrich the foreign language major through their ability to offer courses in second language acquisition, applied linguistics, dialectology, sociolinguistics, history of the language, and discourse analysis. In addition to learning the history and underlying structure of a particular language, students should be offered the opportunity to take general courses in such areas as language and cognition, language and power, bilingualism, language and identity, language and gender, language and myth, language and artificial intelligence, and language and the imagination. These courses appeal broadly to students who major in languages as well as to those who do not.

Research indicates that in doctoral-granting departments, the teaching of first-year language courses breaks down as follows: full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty members teach 7.4% of first-year courses, full-time non-tenure-track faculty members teach 19.6%, part-time instructors teach 15.7%, and graduate student teaching assistants teach 57.4%. (Other undergraduate courses are taught by a much higher percentage of tenure-line faculty members in doctorate-granting departments [40.3 %].) In BA-granting departments, the breakdown is as follows: full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty members teach 41.8% of first-year courses, full-time non-tenure-track faculty members teach 21.1%, part-time instructors teach 34.7%, and graduate student teaching assistants teach 2.4% (Laurence 216, table 3b). It is clear that a redesigned curriculum is a key step in creating an integrated departmental administrative structure in which all members contribute to defining and carrying out a shared educational mission. While language faculty

members are expected to use methodologies that develop students' competencies in reading, writing, and oral expression as preparation for upper-level courses, it is crucial that tenure-line faculty members have a hand in teaching language courses and in shaping and overseeing the content and teaching approaches used throughout the curriculum, from the first year forward. This vision requires departments, in both tenure-track and non-tenure-track searches, to look for instructors who are able to develop and teach broad-based courses aimed at producing the translingual and transcultural competencies described above.

This transformation of curriculum and departmental governance is by far the most important recommendation made by the Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages. In many colleges and universities, language departments have been experimenting with change for some time, and their experience can benefit us all. Unless this kind and degree of change happens over the next ten years, college and university departments of foreign languages will not be in a position to provide leadership in advanced language education. Lack of change will most likely carry serious consequences for both higher education and language learning. Language learning might migrate to training facilities, where instrumental learning will eclipse the deep intellectual and cultural learning that takes place on college campuses.

The changes we foresee in the undergraduate curriculum call for changes in the way graduate studies are structured as well. To meet the needs of undergraduate language programs (which is where the majority of PhD candidates will find employment), graduate studies should provide substantive training in language teaching and in the use of new technologies in addition to cultivating extensive disciplinary knowledge and strong analytic and writing skills. The goals we endorse may be difficult to achieve in some quarters, but they promise to reinvigorate our discipline and our institutions and to reassert the relevance and centrality of language faculty members in shaping the academy.

## Strengthening the Demand for Language Competence within the University

The lack of foreign language competence is as much a fact within academic disciplines as in the society at large. According to a recent MLA survey, only half of the 118 existing PhD programs in English require reading knowledge of two additional languages (Steward 211, table 1). At the graduate level, language requirements are notoriously underenforced across the humanities and the social sciences. Citation indexes reveal a steady decrease in the use of non-English sources in research across the humanities and social sciences, a deficiency that impoverishes intellectual debate. Four-year language majors often graduate with disappointingly low levels of linguistic ability. Opportunities to study abroad and to do course work in the target language are eroding in favor of short-term study in which courses are in English. In addition, the need to work prevents many students from studying abroad at all.

We recommend that institutions take the following steps:

- ◆ Encourage departments to set clear standards of achievement for undergraduate majors in speaking, reading, writing, and comprehension and to develop the programming necessary to meet

these standards.

- ◆ Establish language requirements (or levels of competence) for undergraduate students majoring in fields such as international studies, history, anthropology, music, art history, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and linguistics, as well as for students preparing for careers in law, medicine, and engineering.
- ◆ Encourage departments to enforce language requirements in doctoral programs and to provide courses that enable students both to acquire genuinely usable linguistic skills and to apply those skills in research.
- ◆ Work with colleagues in the social sciences and in policy-oriented departments to strengthen language requirements in the design of their majors and graduate programs and encourage these colleagues to recognize the limits monolingualism imposes on research.
- ◆ Enhance and reward graduate student training in languages and in language teaching. Teach graduate students to use technology in language instruction and learning. Ensure that doctoral programs include funding for research abroad and language work.
- ◆ Encourage foundations to insist on language expertise when projects require it and to fund language acquisition when it is needed for research purposes; that is, make it possible to build language learning into a grant application.
- ◆ Promote faculty learning of new languages and increased competence in languages already in use. Encourage administrations to fund tutors or subsidize summers abroad for faculty members whose research projects call for language expertise. Encourage the National Endowment for the Humanities and other granting organizations to make fellowships available for this purpose.

## Continuing Priorities

The time is right for this transforming approach to language and culture study in higher education. Classroom study and study abroad should be promoted as interdependent necessities: the classroom is an ideal place for structured learning that first sets the stage and later reinforces and builds on learning absorbed in study abroad. Yet the language deficiency that is prevalent in the United States cannot be solved at the college level alone. While learning another language is possible at any age, learning languages other than English must be included in the earliest years of the K–12 system if the United States is to have a citizenry capable of communicating with educated native speakers in their language. To these ends, we continue to advocate the following priorities for language departments and programs:

- ◆ Promote alliances between K–12 educators and college and university faculty members to strengthen language learning at all levels and to foster collaboration.
- ◆ Develop programs for gifted learners, especially in the precollegiate years. Push for enriched, intensified programs for those learners on college campuses.
- ◆ Broaden the range of languages taught. In particular, add locally spoken languages to the

- curriculum. Seek out heritage learners and design a curriculum that meets their needs. Encourage heritage speakers to learn additional languages.
- ◆ Adopt and promote best practices for heritage-language teaching such as those developed by the Center for Applied Linguistics.
  - ◆ Develop programs in translation and interpretation. There is a great unmet demand for educated translators and interpreters, and translation is an ideal context for developing translingual and transcultural abilities as an organizing principle of the language curriculum.
  - ◆ Develop intensive courses and, whenever possible, language-intensive or immersion semesters during which students take multiple courses in the major simultaneously.
  - ◆ Insist on study abroad whenever possible and require courses in the target language. Push administrators to develop financial aid support for study abroad. Provide appropriate courses for students returning from abroad.
  - ◆ Increase the number of guest speakers on campus who lecture in languages other than English.
  - ◆ Make sure campus media centers feature television programs and newspapers in languages other than English. Feature (subtitled) foreign language films for broad campus audiences.
  - ◆ Through a language center or other structure, develop a forum for the exchange of ideas and expertise among language instructors from all departments. Such structures prove invaluable in boosting the morale of teachers and improving the quality of professional and intellectual life.

## Going Forward

Following its long tradition of support for foreign language teaching, the MLA is committed to ensuring that the recommendations in this report are widely disseminated and have every opportunity to succeed in practice. The association is in a unique position to provide research and analysis for the field, to bring together department chairs to discuss ideas for curricular transformation, to create a bank of resources for the profession, and to make profound connections among language-teaching professionals at all levels as well as among local, state, and federal entities that have a role in shaping how language programs are structured and funded. The MLA Executive Council will formulate plans to assist those who are willing to put our recommendations into practice in devising new structures for foreign language departments. As we go forward, the MLA will continue to work with other scholarly and professional associations to articulate common interests and to strengthen our collective mission of paving the way toward a multilingual future for students in the higher education system in the United States.

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## Background Information on Languages in the MLA

The MLA constitution defines the association's purpose as follows: "to promote study, criticism, and research in the more and less commonly taught modern languages and their literatures and to further the common interests of teachers of these subjects." The MLA's activities for the most part have focused on the major and minor European languages and their literatures, although recent initiatives have increased engagement with the languages of Asia and the Middle East. Approximately two-thirds of MLA members work in English-language-based studies; this proportion has remained steady for some years. With regard to institutional membership in the Association of Departments of English (ADE) and the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages (ADFL), language departments slightly outnumber English departments. In 2006 the ADFL had 892 member departments, while the ADE had 747 such members. Departments of foreign languages, especially those that house a single language, tend to have fewer faculty members than departments of English. Of the 85 MLA divisions in 2006, 20 are identified specifically with English and 28 with languages other than English; 37 are unmarked as to language. Of the 48 discussion groups, 8 are specific to English and 22 are specific to languages other than English; 18 are unmarked as to language. Twelve languages and 8 language groups are represented in the discussion groups. Among the 107 allied organizations of the MLA, 50 are specific to English, 30 are identified with languages other than English, and 27 are not marked as to language. In the employment arena, about half the positions advertised in the *MLA Job Information List* are in language departments, and about half of these are in Spanish.

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