

Editorial introduction: A reflection on the role of foreign language learning in today's education

Introducción editorial: Una reflexión sobre el papel del aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras en la educación de hoy

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INTRODUCTION

As a guest editor of this edition of the *Latin American Journal of Content and Language Integrated Learning (LACLIL)*, I would like to share with the readers a reflection on what I perceive as the evolving role of foreign language (FL) learning in today's educational settings. I offer some ideas on what institutions need to consider in FL teaching and propose some questions for these to think about.

Many people are in contact with other languages in mass communication as well as in private communication. Education, research, entertainment, edutainment, news, and social networks, Web sites and platforms—to name a few—pervade work and home routines. These serve the most diverse audiences and purposes. On the other hand, academic and professional mobility has become the norm. People work in networks; they are connected by interests, often independently of nationality, culture, or language.

Today the study of an FL may provide people with opportunities to interact with other cultures and to gain awareness on a global citizenship. Information technologies have facilitated the purposeful or the incidental contact with world communities; these factors have transformed the way we learn, we teach, and we interact with others. Along those lines, I see that FL education allows access to global knowledge. In addition to promoting communication and culture, it serves as an instrument for disseminating the knowledge generated locally. Thus, connections with other communities become of utmost importance.

HOW CAN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS ADAPT TO THE NEW ROLES OF FL STUDY?

In the last decade, FL learning and use has evolved in its purposes, in its genres, in its means, and in its substance. Business transactions, academic communication, social interactions, and everyday routines (for just some examples) tend to be diverse, multilingual, and multicultural. The educational system has been challenged to prepare people to use a FL for communication as opposed to as a subject of study.

The challenge to adapt to the new roles of FL learning and use covers funding, large-scale program development, syllabus design, methodology, implementation of ICT, testing, assessment, and evaluation (see Ruane, 2003). In addition, the educational sector has been required to not only start FL education earlier, but to be held accountable for faster, better, and more tangible results in FL proficiency. In this panorama, I feel institutions would need to offer:

- practical language training especially for learners not specializing in languages,
- the use and development of appropriate technology for language learning,
- research and development in the field of language teaching and learning,
- contribution of FL study to international academic communication with the consolidation of programs that promote scholarship and divulgation of institutional projects, achievements, publications and research,
- an agenda with the libraries and the resource centers to promote access to academic databases and to reliable sources of information since the FL is so important in this endeavor,
- constitution of language programs that meet the demand for high standards,
- offer activities to promote the arts from diverse cultures

Along the lines of assuming new roles, I would like to argue for the specificity of FL teaching. The instruction received in classrooms may lag behind the education received in the environment. Meeting the present and the future needs of learners requires a revision of syllabi and of classroom practices. Learners need exposure to, and study of, the genres they encounter daily and those genres they encounter in disciplines of study. Genres such as reviews of books, movies, television shows, as

well as scientific reports and specialized lectures, would add meaning and usefulness to FL study.

Hyland (2002) argues that “effective language teaching involves taking specificity seriously. It means that we must go as far as we can” (p. 394). For teachers, this means introducing learners to the relevant genres with the purpose of allowing them to participate in a discourse community organized around specific and purposeful activities. This can be approached in pragmatic or critical ways, and there has been a considerable amount of discussion about the need to avoid uncritical induction of students into disciplinary discourses and identities (Canagarajah, 2002; Harwood & Hadley, 2004; Pennycook, 1997).

In closing I would like to pose some of the questions that academic institutions need to ask themselves:

- How can language programs propose ways to address the teaching of the FL as meaningful and useful to their learners and to their institution?
- How can institutions propose internal and external assessment and evaluation that are coherent with the FL programs?
- How can new spaces be created to stimulate learner’s agency and autonomy in FL learning?
- How can FL study better relate to the agenda of internationalization of education?

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