

FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract: Globalization demands more foreign languages, not less. In addition to providing you with knowledge, skills and attitudes that are necessary in the workplace, the study of languages, literatures, and cultures, like the study of history, philosophy, or mathematics, helps you develop the analytic skills needed to be an effective participant in local and national discussions. Studying languages in the context of history, politics, and popular culture can help you follow international events with insight, opening up perspectives to make you an informed and responsible citizen of your country and of the world. Knowing another language enriches your personal life, expands the range of professional opportunities open to you, and increases your power to act as a citizen of the world. At the college level you can begin a new language or build on your knowledge of a language that you have already studied. College may also be the first chance you will have to study languages such as Russian, Chinese, Japanese, or Arabic. Forget the myth that you have to learn languages as a child: in the classroom young adults can be faster and more effective learners than small children.

Key words: globalization, intercultural awareness, foreign language education, Internet, transnational communication.

Globalization – friend or foe?

Covering a wide range of distinct political, economic, and cultural trends, the term “globalization” has quickly become one of the most fashionable buzzwords of contemporary political and academic debate. Globalization touches the lives of people everywhere. Unfortunately, recent global opinion polls reveal that many people fear globalization. While globalization can bring immense beneficial change, it also proves to bring serious damages.

On the one hand, globalization is known as a process by which the people of the world are unified into a single society and function together. This process is a combination of economic, technological, socio-cultural and political forces. The

whole process describes a way of erasing national boundaries for global benefit. Furthermore, globalization is very often used to refer to the economic process, which is the integration of national economies into the international economy through trade, foreign direct investment, capital flows, migration, and the spread of technology. This leads to lower prices, more employment, higher output and a higher standard of living for those in developing countries.

On the other hand, technology has now created the possibility and even the likelihood of a global culture. The Internet, fax machines, satellites, and cable TV are sweeping away cultural boundaries. This spread of values, norms, and culture tends to promote Western ideals of capitalism. In this way, local cultures fall victim to this global "consumer" culture; for example, Romanians have started celebrating *St. Valentine's Day* and forgot about their traditional one, *Dragobete*. Moreover, we have witnessed the mass phenomenon of using the name of a label to refer to a product we may need everyday. Therefore, we blow our noses in a "Kleenex", use a "Rimmel" or "Mascara" for the eyelashes, clean the room with the "Hoover" or wash the dishes with "Fairy". These labels have been turned into common nouns to denote the objects they represent. Small companies inevitably suffer from this and tend to be swollen by the big companies.

All in all, globalization creates new markets and wealth together with widespread suffering, disorder, and unrest. It is both a source of worldwide benefit and repression.

The Impact of Globalization on Foreign Language Education

Globalization is a process by which the people of the world are unified into a single society and functioning together (Chomsky, 2006). Moreover, this process is a combination of economic, technological, sociocultural and political forces (Croucher, 2004: 10), which drives to a clear need for common language(s). English is not only a system communication, but also the preeminent language of science, technology and medicine. Since English has become the lingua franca of the 21st century, over 2 billion people are learning English nowadays. This serves to emphasize on the fact that the need of language learning is greater than ever.

Language study introduces you to new realms of ideas, customs, habits, and values. In both professional and personal ways, the twenty-first century places demands on people's global knowledge. As the Internet has changed the way we think about the transfer of information, so has it eliminated the sense of distance between us and the citizens of other countries. Materials from around the world, for both business and pleasure, are available to every person who has access to a computer. Diverse cultures in contact with one another can create unprecedented opportunities for exchange, cooperation, and mutual benefit. International contacts are an integral part of many careers, and people without the skill and sensitivity to deal with other cultures are at a disadvantage.

There is no secret that Internet has a big impact on language learning. Singhal (1997) discussed the potential benefits of the Internet and how it can be used in the second or foreign language classroom. She indicates that Internet is not only a new tool of communication, but also a teaching and learning tool. Furthermore, LeLoup and Ponterio (2001) listed a number of Internet applications that can be used to enrich the foreign language classroom. These applications include: email, mailing list, e-journals, World Wide Web, streaming audio and video, search engines, remote access to libraries and database, chat, audio and video conferencing and messaging, web course management etc. These applications can be categorized into:

- Information Resources – Web directories, searchable database (general – Eric, Google, Informaworld. Language Education specific – Merlot), online textbooks and learning materials (including audio and video – Podcasting, YouTube);
- Communication – asynchronous email, discussion forum and blog (including voice email like Wimba and YackPack); synchronous instant messengers (MSN, Yahoo); Internet telephony programs (Skype, Voipstunt);
- Collaborative learning – Document sharing, editing and publishing (whiteboard.com, docs.google.com);
- Learning tools – online dictionary, glossing engine, character animation, text-to-speech, concordance etc.;
- Virtual classroom and office for online learning and long distance education (Elluminate, Wizlq, webex etc.).

It is obvious that changes are bound to take place which means that the way of class preparation and presentation change (including testing) – from pen and paper (textbook, handouts, tests) to keyboard and screen (media) PPT, ePlan, eText, AP Chinese. The way of teaching and learning has changed from one way delivery to two way interaction/communication (transnational). This does not happen only between teachers and students (Blogs, discussions, email), but also between the students and native speakers of the target languages and learners elsewhere. Moreover, the place of teaching and learning has changed from fixed classrooms and time to anywhere and anytime, which include: classrooms, labs, online exercises and tests, virtual classroom teaching, virtual office hours and tutoring.

Of course that when it comes to pinpointing the advantages of using the Internet in language teaching and learning, one should bear in mind that it:

- helps learners gain more input;
- increases synchronous and asynchronous communication;
- gives the opportunity to construct knowledge together by expressing themselves in print and then assessing, evaluating, comparing and reflecting on their own views and those of others;
- allows learners to practice specific skills such as negotiating, persuading, clarifying meaning, requesting information, and

engaging in true-life, authentic discussions via communication with native speakers.

Nevertheless, language learners may encounter some problems when it comes to this new-generation style of language acquisition. One may struggle with accessibility and inequity since the Internet is not always accessible by all learners and teachers: 75.6 % in Sweden, 4.5 % in Kenya. Then, Internet unfamiliarity may raise problems, because not all teachers and students prove to be familiar with the Internet. Another problematic aspect may refer to those topics that are unsuitable for school children, but that they have access to. Last but not least, there is the information explosion; the increasing amount of information generally makes learners confused while they try to reach specific information.

What will the future bring? No one can answer this question clearly since technological development is unpredictable. Technology is invisible, hardly even recognized as a technology, taken for granted in everyday life. It will all be normalized “when computers are treated as always secondary to learning itself, when the needs of learners will be carefully analyzed first of all, and then the computer used to serve those needs” (Bax, 2003: 15). Therefore, all we need to do is to think globally and act locally.

Language learning is more than the simple learning of grammatical rules or acquisition of vocabulary. Learners need to be put into a position where they can develop a deeper understanding of cultural specifics underlying the target language. Raising intercultural awareness, as well as empowering learners to be able to deal with stereotypical viewpoints are important aims of the language curriculum. Appropriate scenarios for language teaching and learning always ensure that – when looking at the target culture – learners are also encouraged to look at and reflect on their own culture as well as to reconsider the specifics of their own cultural background, thus developing new perspectives. Claire Kramsch (1998: 36) suggested that the aim of intercultural learning is to meet in what she calls “a third place”. This third place is situated somewhere in between the two cultures, and it “rows in the interstices between the cultures the learner grew up with and new cultures he or she is being introduced to.” Metaphorically speaking one could say that learners should be invited to meet in the middle of a bridge built with bricks from both cultures. Thus, the computer and the Internet can be used to support learners in their need to encounter the target culture and to reflect the differences and similarities not only between themselves and others, but also between their own and other cultures.

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