

# Teaching World Languages for Social Justice

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## *Abstract*

*The arguments in favor of language education have proceeded largely from perspectives that have failed to critically examine the marketplace ideology pervasive in the field. These ideological influences not only hold our endeavors in tension with stated objectives, but influence language education in Christian settings in ways that are inconsistent with a broader responsibility to fellow humans. The author explicates the contexts of foreign language advocacy in the United States, and comments on the challenges for Christian educators.*

If I stood before you today,<sup>1</sup> claiming to quote scripture, I would likely be challenged on the following “verses”:

Blessed are the marketable, for they shall inherit the earth;

And do not forget to be efficient for with such sacrifices  
God is pleased;

Good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world.

Understandably, such distortions of scripture are not consistent with a Christian world-view. However, I would submit that for many foreign language education programs in Christian settings, such distortions have infiltrated a great deal of our curricular thinking.

For several years, I have argued that a number of language educators are growing increasingly dissatisfied with the status quo of our profession, citing the “standards movement” as part of the root of their dissatisfaction. I reasoned that it feels as though language curricula are being “sterilized” and packaged in a way that eliminates much of the creativity

and passion that led many of us into this field in the first place. To be sure, nothing in the language standards, including the much heralded “five C’s” of foreign language circles, precludes a Christian worldview in the classroom. However, there exists a remarkably stark contrast between the direction of curricula and the context in which language education takes place in the United States. To be frank, static curricula are poor shadows when compared to the growing vibrancy of linguistic diversity enriching communities of the United States with increasing frequency. And, despite the normal round of xenophobia following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks and the “freedom fries” retaliation to the French position on the Iraqi war, world language education in our context may remain relatively unscathed by current global events. That should concern us most of all.

“Why should it *concern* us?” Certainly the anti-German hysteria almost a century ago in the United States affected German language enrollments and programs negatively and such a trend would make sense in the case of French. Granted. But a greater danger looms, I contend, in that the comparative silence serves as evidence of a much greater hazard; namely, that world language education in the United States has become largely extraneous to the national dialogue. Students who eventually become adult residents of the United States may see absolutely no connection between their world language learning experiences and their daily lives. They spent a few years in language classrooms in high school or college, but “didn’t learn anything.” This apparent failure is far from a simple matter.

One reason for this image of foreign language education in the public imaginary lies in our own acceptance of marketplace ideologies, commonplace in educational programming, and manifestly inappropriate to justify the study of languages in the contemporary United States. Justification often stems from a viewpoint, or paradigm, from which one argues. For example, educational conservatives<sup>2</sup> often advocate studying languages by suggesting that languages are important in the well-rounded preparation of an educated person. Foreign language educators have historically argued that foreign languages contributed measurably to education, and that abilities in languages were indispensable as a characteristic of an educated person (see Lado, 1964). Though perhaps such arguments are not articulated as often today, these ideas still hold a level of attraction for language educators, since we recognize the contributions our own language learning has made to our worldview(s). Educational conservatives, then, often argue, ironically, for what has been traditionally called a “liberal”

education. Within Christian settings and beyond, scholars have challenged the field to consider, in effect, what the educated Christian should take from a language classroom.

A second perspective, and perhaps the more contemporary justification of foreign language study in the curriculum, relates to the day-to-day value of such training. These arguments point out that language education benefits both the workplace and the multicultural world students will inhabit. As the framers of the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* have suggested:

To study another language and culture is to gain an especially rich preparation for the future. It is difficult to imagine a job, a profession, a career, or a leisure activity in the twenty-first century which will not be enhanced by the ability to communicate efficiently and sensitively with others. . . . Possession of the linguistic and cultural insights which come with foreign language study will be a requisite for life as a citizen in the worldwide neighborhood. (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999, p. 12)

Similar arguments offered along these lines tend to focus on issues of national security. Kurt Müller (1986), for example, argued during the latter days of the cold war that “the study of the use of foreign languages by the U.S. armed forces has revealed that language competence is an important component of national defense” (p. 138). Though national defense may not constitute “day-to-day” concerns, the tragic events of September 11<sup>th</sup> have reminded a grieving country of our need for language knowledge as well, as we seek to understand or eliminate those who launched the attacks.

Methodological changes preferred by educationally progressive camps, similarly, have shifted to communicative, “real” world emphases that infuse the curriculum with what is seen as everyday relevance for students. Often, progressive educators have attempted to tie language proficiency to gains in marketable skills or tourist pursuits. Indeed, foreign language education has seen a century of remarkable change in terms of methodological theory in the United States. Certainly, lack of curricular innovation has not been an issue on the theoretical level. Some could argue, however, that what happens in the classroom has not changed ap-

preciably (see, for example, Connor, 1995).

A third trend seen historically, though not a paradigm per se, in foreign language education in the United States can be called a legacy of non-success<sup>3</sup>. Supporters of foreign language education have mourned the loss of our nation's language competence (Simon, 1980), including some, as in the case of the much celebrated President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies of 1979, who have concluded that the situation in terms of our nation's language ability was scandalous. Recently, the President of Drake University in Iowa, a former professor of Russian, disbanded the entire foreign language department in favor of study abroad programs designed to increase language abilities in students, citing departmental failures as his reason (Schneider, 2001). In terms of the resources committed to language study in the United States, there was and is substantial doubt as to its benefit as currently practiced in the marketplace of graduates.

Our legacy of non-success has been reflected in the waxing and waning of enrollments,<sup>4</sup> numbers perhaps of themselves largely inconclusive in determining our overall significance. Perhaps a growing skepticism as to the importance of language education is partially to blame. Some scholars have questioned the necessity of foreign language education in numerous forms, perhaps most often in terms of specific fields of study including English (see Patty, 1989), speech and communication (see Hall, 1976), and biological sciences (see Janies, 1969). In terms of anecdotal reports, it is not uncommon to hear of university faculty senates or high school principals debating the removal of foreign languages from general education or core curriculum requirements.

## Languages in the market

Marketplace ideology in American education is not a particularly recent phenomenon. Kerr, in a subsequent edition, reiterated a statement first made in 1963:

The production, distribution, and consumption of "knowledge" in all its forms is said to account for 29% of gross national product . . . and "knowledge production" is growing at about twice the rate of the rest of the economy. Knowledge has certainly never in history been so central to the conduct of an entire society. . . And the

university is at the center of the knowledge process. (1982, p.88)

As a result of market ideology, language educators may continue to find themselves justifying the existence of language requirements at all levels, especially at schools and colleges where the curricular *modus operandi* increasingly follows logic similar to Chaffee's (1998):

The only reason to create and maintain a formal organization like a business or university is to perform functions that someone—a customer—needs which cannot be done alone or in small groups. A primary definition of what is needed is what customers are willing to pay for, which is determined by their resources and priorities. Competing demands for both public and personal funds are rising rapidly; the costs of operating a university are rising rapidly; and the economy is reasonably steady. This is a recipe for disaster in any industry unless customer satisfaction is rising rapidly. (p. 18)

The conservative position, as discussed above, that holds that foreign language education is beneficial in the formation of the “well-educated” person, becomes complicated by calls to give students more choice in their school programs, or in their “consumption” of the educational process. Students can merely argue that they do not want or need to take languages, and marketplace rationales would support dropping such requirements from the curriculum, particularly in U.S. settings where few students actually will be in a position where they have no option to use English. Paradoxically, as educational conservatives issue calls for language knowledge, while the requirements are implemented in a way that is sensitive to market concerns, the courses take shape primarily as a form of cultural capital entrenched in the tradition of schooling. In other words, students are expected to take a foreign language because it is “good for them” and part of an “education,” but no level of language proficiency is required.

These practices, in turn, reflect what Freire (1997) calls the banking model of education and set up what Reagan (2002) refers to as a political economy of languages in education: some languages “count” as appropriate for serious study (such as French, German, and Spanish), others do not (such as American Sign Language, depending on context, Haitian Creole, Ebonics, etc.), often based on sociopolitical distinctions of prestige to the

“educated person.” In practice today, though, the tension between the ideal of the “educated person” and the corporatizing of curricular programmatic thought (e.g., making decisions about curricula filtered through the logic of the marketplace) leads to a situation in which schools, as “producers” of a knowledge commodity, require language courses as an obstacle, filter, or hurdle to completing a course of study, or increasingly not at all. How many students have taken foreign languages at the college or high school level simply because it was a “requirement” prerequisite to the awarding of a degree or diploma?

The progressive position on the other hand, relying on “real world” applications for justification and the shaping of curricula, fares just as poorly within evaluative frameworks drawn from market ideology. The explosive growth of English (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000) and the geopolitical power invested in the language (Pennycook, 1995), renders “real world” applications of the skills and knowledge gained in contemporary foreign language education in the United States minimal at best, and claims to the contrary suggesting that foreign language education provides “marketable” skills consistently fail to resonate as convincing with most educators. Language professionals themselves reject many such claims, as demonstrated by the authors of Idaho’s curriculum guide when they assert that, “As for studying a foreign language for vocational purposes, within this country there is almost always a plethora of native speakers of any language needed in commerce” (Idaho State Department of Education, 1994, p. 21).

Curricular reforms that have included such activities as asking directions in a foreign country, discussion of school schedules with students abroad, and similar approaches do not pass a similar test of market usefulness. It is likely that the vast majority of Americans will never enter into such exchanges and that what little proficiency they may develop in our classrooms involves situations just as “foreign” to them as were the literary readings in grammar-translation classrooms of the past. It is certainly ironic that movements in the field to provide more “useful” language education could have suffered the same fate as their literarily focused predecessors—that is, being seen as out of touch with contemporary educational trends. Language classes of today could be largely seen as extraneous to the market-driven schooling experience, and thus the absence of discussion of language education in the US writ large in the wake of international conflict should be troubling.

As both liberal and conservative language educators have ac-

cepted the supremacy of marketplace rationales for contemporary language educational practice, the market demand for contemporary foreign language education as practiced has seemingly grown significantly smaller. And ironically, even as scholars have rightfully critiqued the elitist perspective of some who call for the “educated person,” they have unwittingly refuted perhaps the most compelling reason for language education—that is, that well-educated people should have some experience learning a second language. However, the logic of the marketplace, with its emphasis on production and consumption metaphors, fails to provide compelling arguments for contemporary language study. It fails, furthermore, to provide effective guidance on structuring foreign language curricula. Consumerism and market ideologies should not be the primary sources guiding the determination of educational requirements or programs in language education.

### Where can we go? Advocating a critical pedagogy of language education

Many scholars espouse the need for critical awareness and social justice, but have largely failed to recognize the role language education can play in their endeavors. The power of language learning, those of us in the field recognize, can be a significant component of education. Our endeavor can indeed provide students with benefits not found in other disciplines. Foreign language educators, and especially those in Christian settings, need to examine the frames of reference within which we have constructed our professional activities. Our endeavors are not apolitical, and our decision-making is impacted by our reliance on the marketplace in determining priorities. I do not mean to suggest that all marketable skills should be banished from the curriculum. Rather, I want to argue that the tensions created by pressures to be marketable can bear directly on any desire to integrate faith and learning.

In foreign language education, the focus of professional discussion should not be centered on *whether* students need to study second languages, but on *what kind* of second language education students should have at all levels and on the justification of that form and focus of language education beyond marketplace reasoning. In the pursuit of education, teachers and students have an ethical and moral responsibility related to the production and expansion of human knowledge that can be addressed through a thoughtful approach to world language education fully consider-

ing the context in which we operate. World language educators in all settings will need, in my view, to reform and expand language curricula and instruction along the lines of a critical approach to language education, pedagogically oriented toward an exploration of issues related to the role of language in discourses, in discrimination, and in ideology.

One powerful justification for foreign language education lies in the power of the *process* of language learning, perhaps even more so than in any product of language proficiency. Such processes may not lend themselves well to easily measurable “value added” or marketable skills. However, as one example, the fact that words embody concepts and culture in a way that does not always include a one-to-one correspondence with words in other languages is a lesson learned only in the study of a second language and knowledge that, though not reducible to a multiple choice question or other indicator of “value,” is quite valuable for students. If the world views of residents of our global village are embodied, at least in part, in their languages, then the study of foreign languages is central to an educational program among people committed to faith and learning integration, as well as democracy. As the study of natural sciences is vital to those who would live in and seek to understand our natural world, so the study of languages is indispensable for those who live in our social world.

Consider that communities of “world” language speakers are at home in most, if not all, areas of the United States, and engaging these realities within our classroom will be an integral part of such a reform. Curricular reform related to such additions will aid us in realizing the potential of our field in contributing meaningfully to students’ lives. However, age-old formulas for rewriting curricula are unlikely to meet the challenges.

Reforming foreign language education will involve the decentralization of the curriculum and instructional reform process in a move to counter hierarchical approaches. Kumaravadivelu (2001) refers to a similar idea in the call for a postmethod pedagogy, as do discussions of *macrocontextualization* in the literature (see Osborn, 2000; Reagan & Osborn, 2002; Reyes, 2002). Macrocontextualization suggests that we plan educational programs in language by referencing the local, regional, national, and global contexts in which the programs are situated. The contexts include social, political, historical, and ethical considerations that may vary considerably from classroom to classroom. The days of “one size fits all” approach to language education already have passed or soon will pass. Hopefully, language educators at all levels will offer a significant voice in a

critical reformation of the field. A revolutionary pedagogy cannot be comprised solely of rhetoric, however. It must translate into beneficial action. In this work, it is my goal to begin the process of building just such a bridge.

### How do we start the journey?

Issues of language education are not merely academic—they are, in fact, fundamental to any stated or implicit goals of a just society (see Osborn, 2000; 2002; Reagan & Osborn, 2002; Shohamy, 2001; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Tollefson, 2002). In *Critical Reflection and the Foreign Language Classroom*, I have suggested that:

In effect, by assuming that all non-English languages are somehow related to that which is foreign, language educational endeavors serve to reinforce a language identity by default. Though challenges to English as an official language are often mounted, within the realm of common sense, the national and official languages of the United States are both, and only, English. Non-dominant language speakers are thereby marginalized as the media of their expression take on a devalued position. A student who chooses to adopt the view of the dominant culture, therefore, is put in a position of assimilating linguistically. Further, those students who speak American English as a native language are firm in their beliefs that English is *the* language of the United States. (Osborn, 2000, p. 87)

In *The Foreign Language Educator in Society: Toward a Critical Pedagogy*, Timothy Reagan and I have argued that:

We take as a given that foreign language education in American public schools is largely unsuccessful at producing individuals competent in second languages. We also take as a given that this lack of success is not due to any particular methodological or pedagogical failure on the part of foreign language teachers. . . . These factors alone do not, and cannot, however, explain the overwhelming nature of our failure to achieve our articulated goals. Rather, in order to explain why foreign language educa-

tion is relatively unsuccessful in contemporary American society, we need to look more critically at the social, political, cultural, historical, and economic context in which foreign language education takes place. (Reagan and Osborn, 2002, p. 2)

Finally, in *The Future of Foreign Language Education in the United States*, I attempted to bring together a number of scholars, both within and outside the field, to share their input by asking them how the changing social and academic context of the field affects language education. I concluded that we have much work ahead of us in terms of exploring the social responsibility we hold as language educators, and pointed to macrocontextualization as one potent avenue of reform.

Other language scholars, as well, have begun to examine our endeavors with a greater sociopolitical context. Eschewing a solely positivist understanding of language learning and teaching, the authors have issued calls for looking at the political, sociological, and historical frameworks within which students learn a language in addition to their own.

Ryuko Kubota (2003) has explored some specifics of how the Japanese are represented in foreign language textbooks from a similar perspective, noting, “the image of teacher-centered pedagogy and lack of critical thinking among Japanese students persists as a stereotype, influencing the thinking of not only the general public but also researchers in creating a dichotomy of US and THEM” (p. 82). Kubota, Austin, and Saito-Abbot (2003) noted:

Teachers—as intellectuals and not mere technicians of learner-centeredness—have a responsibility to bring broader perspectives on critical issues to their students, rather than replicating past blindness to issues of difference and inequality. . . . Researchers and practitioners must shift their attention beyond apolitical appreciation and celebration of foreign culture, to critically explore issues of diversity and sociopolitical aspects of human communication, and to make foreign language education instrumental in creating greater equality. (p. 22)

Concerns remain. Most often stated anecdotally, the analysis offered by critical insights on language education is viewed with enthusiasm by scholars and teachers alike, yet the obstacles to translating these

ideals into classroom practice are seen as insurmountable in a standards-crazed environment. Thus, many educators simply “wring their hands” and point out that the contemporary classroom implications of such theoretical standpoints are unclear, at best (for a particularly balanced criticism, see Johnston, 1999).

What I wish to issue is a call to begin the process of building the bridges from theory to practice in teaching world languages for social justice. The theoretical background from which one could draw is immense (see Osborn, 2006; Smith & Osborn, 2007). Critical theory, critical pedagogy, critical race theory, postcolonial studies and postmodernism are just a few of the labels one may find in an attempt to begin the process of bridge building, as is the growing body of literature on faith and learning integration. However, I caution that such a project must somehow disentangle itself from the “rhetoric of possibility” that frustrates practitioners and students alike.

In conclusion, teaching world languages for social justice will mean recognizing the economic and political forces forming the contexts in which we operate, and resisting those that are incommensurate with our goals. Additionally, we should chart a course of accountability not to national citizenship, but in a Christian context especially, to a broader responsibility to each other in the human race. For it is the meek who inherit the earth, and God is pleased with the sacrifice of doing good and sharing with others. And for language educators who strive every day to conform to the market, it is indeed important to ask, what good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This paper was given as the keynote address at the sixteenth annual NACFLA conference at Baylor University, Waco, Texas, March 30 – April 1, 2006. The ideas contained within this article are echoed and explored more in depth in *Teaching World Languages for Social Justice: A Sourcebook of Principles and Practices* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Terminology here is a difficult matter. I am endeavoring to explore generally recognized historical trends, but do not suggest a historiographic treatment, and this exercise will necessarily run the risk of overgeneralization. The reader should view the categories “educational conservative” and “educational progressive” as heuristic, not absolute. Such categorization is consistent with many introductory ap-

proaches to the foundations of education (see Johnson et. al, 1999 or Schultz 2001 as examples). My primary goal is to discuss the interplay of market ideology and historical trends in shaping our image.

<sup>3</sup> I am choosing to avoid the term “failure” here due to an important distinction. Non-success implies that we have not reached certain product goals (e.g., proficiency). Yet, foreign language education has played a significant sociological role in the United States — one that we are only beginning to understand. It can be argued that in that vein, the field of foreign language education has been quite successful in providing the country with a symbolic nod to diverse linguistic heritage without actually threatening the status quo.

<sup>4</sup> For public high school enrollment figures over the past century, consult <http://www.actfl.org/public/articles/details.cfm?id=139>. Another route is <http://www.actfl.org> (select “Special Projects,” then “Foreign Language Enrollments”).

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