

Revisiting the MLA Report on reconfiguring foreign language programs: The role of reading

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I may come to this commentary from a fairly different perspective than a number of other responders. First, I am not from a modern languages department, but an English department. I am not a member of a modern languages faculty, but rather an applied linguistics faculty. Nonetheless, I have had multiple experiences with developing language learning curricula, both in the U.S. and abroad. I have become familiar with foreign language instruction in about 30 countries that I have visited, and in some settings have assisted with curriculum (re)design. I have had some experience evaluating language programs, and I have been involved with higher education policy development. Finally, I have a long-standing interest in second language (L2) reading development, covering both research perspectives and instructional practices.

My first response to the MLA report is that it clearly identifies a number of the problems facing modern languages departments today. Enrollments and majors are declining in most modern languages departments throughout the U.S. Other academic departments do not strongly enforce language requirements, especially the modern languages requirements for PhD students. Most other departments are not looking to modern languages departments for integrated or interdisciplinary studies. Modern languages departments often have serious divisions among their faculty, especially between the language teachers and the literary scholars. Most senior faculty do not, and for the most part do not want to, teach language courses. Finally, the Report notes that “the standard configuration of foreign language curricula” is in need of major rethinking. Yet, a Report that, in part, blames modern languages department difficulties on a lack of cooperation from other university departments would seem to suggest a limited vision in an increasingly competitive university environment.

My second response is that this Report does not provide many useful guidelines for radically different modern language instruction in U.S. universities in the coming years. In brief, it seems to be written for the benefit of the modern languages faculty. It gives little serious thought to contemporary students in U.S. universities and how they could be encouraged to learn and use foreign languages. However, the future of foreign language study at U.S. universities is not likely to rest with what faculty want, but with what students want, or at least what students are willing to value. There seems to be very little awareness in the Report that university curricula need to address relevance to student needs first and foremost.

The lack of concern for student priorities is clear from comments at the outset of the Report:

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 instrumental focus to support the needs of 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. (p. 2)

This quote unwittingly demonstrates the obvious need for modern languages departments to engage in a radical rethinking of their curricula. Unfortunately, the statement also explicitly states that modern languages departments should not engage in an instrumental focus (that students might value), but in a constitutive view that reinforces faculty desires. Given this non-instrumentalist goal specified by the MLA Report, it is somewhat difficult to address the role of reading in a reconstituted modern language curricula.

It is easy to identify compelling reasons why students might want to develop a strong foreign language (FL) reading ability during their university studies, whether undergraduate or graduate. If students came first, and if they were *persuaded* of the value of learning to read a foreign language well, a large number of recommendations could be proposed as guidelines for future modern languages department curricula.

Just as first language (L1) students need to develop and use a highly skilled instrumental ability to read in their own first language (as do many English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in academic learning contexts), students in U.S. foreign language learning contexts could come to value such skills and persist in their modern language study. But the development of such skills is neither easy nor quickly established. Perhaps this observation is the biggest contribution I can make in this commentary—developing highly skilled reading abilities is a very challenging goal that takes a lot of effort (and motivation) and a long time. There is nothing simply “instrumental” about it.

To become a good independent FL reader, able to carry out a wide range of comprehension and interpretive tasks, a student would need to build FL skills and strategic resources readily recognized by L2 reading experts from a range of academic backgrounds. These skills and resources include

1. A very large recognition vocabulary
2. A well developed awareness of discourse (and genre) structure in a wide range of texts
3. The strategic resources to interpret (and use) complex and challenging texts for a variety of purposes
4. Extensive exposure to L2 texts over long periods of time and with a wide variety of texts
5. The motivation to engage, persist, and achieve success with more and more challenging texts
6. An awareness of goals for learning that support motivation
7. A supportive and engaging curriculum

These skills and resources only lead to high levels of reading ability through extended reading

practice and carefully developed long-term intensive reading instruction.

It is certainly true that FL curricula can be based on culture, aesthetics, media, history, literature, contemporary events, music, fashions, food, philosophy, and more. These types of curricula require comprehension and interpretation abilities that are central to advanced reading instruction. Moreover, culturally driven curricula will appeal to a range of student interests, especially at universities in which study abroad is strongly encouraged. Students interested in cultural traditions, literature, aesthetics, and philosophy will encounter many challenging texts, and they will need advanced training and practice with reading skills that support comprehension and interpretation. But the required reading skills, such as those noted above, do not come easily if students are to engage in fluent FL reading across a range of texts, tasks, and purposes. For this reason, the “instrumental” orientation is not simply “instrumental”, it is “fundamental”. In truth, it should be at the core of the modern languages curriculum.

In addition, the view of establishing a “constitutive” orientation as the foundation of the modern language curriculum would seem to severely limit the possibility for increasing numbers of students, majors, and interdisciplinary programs. Reading skills (as well as writing, listening, and speaking skills) that allow students to use the FL comfortably to meet complex and interesting goals would be a curricular goal that is likely to have more far-reaching consequences for modern language curricula.

As long as developing a high level of language abilities is a goal for students—a goal that should take years of study when students begin at fairly low proficiency levels—many students will see much more value in an interesting and engaging “instrumentalist” perspective than they would in a constitutive perspective. After all, what percentage of U.S. L1 students pick up and read literature texts in their L1 for pleasure reading? If this seems somewhat hard to believe, I suggest that student surveys, appropriately developed, would reveal the value of an instrumentalist orientation to language learning. Students might value a FL ability that allows them to read and apply L2 information to their own disciplinary work, whether the discipline is business, engineering, chemistry, mathematics, psychology, or forestry. They might value a FL ability as support for international relations majors. They might value a FL ability that allows them to pursue an internship in another country in their own major. They might value a FL ability that opens the door to a post-doctoral (or pre-doctoral) experience in another country, or a teaching opportunity abroad. They might value a FL ability that leads to a far richer and more innovative undergraduate study abroad opportunity.

In reading over the MLA Report, I did not see any discussion of advanced reading instruction with the goals referred to in this commentary. One might argue that the Report was not devoted specifically to reading abilities, and so a set of specific reading skills should not be expected while discussing curricular changes. But the same difficulties would arise if writing abilities, listening abilities, or speaking abilities were the “instrumental” skills under consideration.

My comments could be seen as a harsh critique of the MLA Report, but they could also be seen as a suggestion that the MLA rethink the quick dismissal of a straightforward language learning perspective. There is, in fact, great power associated with becoming skilled in a FL at a very high proficiency level, and that goal should not be reserved only for students who begin modern

language coursework with strong FL skills. Furthermore, the path to a very high proficiency level should not be limited to literature and culture as the sole content-focus for learning. From my perspective as an applied linguist, people become very skilled in FL reading because they engage in FL reading willingly, read extensively for a long period of time, have high interest and motivation, are welcomed in a like-minded community of FL learners, and achieve reasonable success as FL learning tasks increase in difficulty.

FL learner engagement with L2 literary and cultural traditions, historical and political consciousness, social sensibility, and aesthetic perceptions may represent an important path to strong FL language abilities, but it should not be the only path open to students. As my comments make clear, I found the MLA Report to be limiting. As a consequence, I do not see how the continuing priorities and recommendations of the Report will prepare new generations of learners for the joys and excitement of freely reading interesting and stimulating texts in a foreign language.

Reference

MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages. (2007). *Foreign languages and higher education: New structures for a Changed World*. Retrieved from http://www.mla.org/pdf/forlang_news_pdf.pdf

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