Pathways to Paradigm Change: Critical Examinations of Prevailing Discourses and Ideologies in Second Language Education

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Chapter 6
Emerging Discourses and Practices in Language Education: Who Is Driving Change?

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Whereas we recognize the merits of learning a second language, the UGA deems it unnecessary and unwise to require competency or exposure to a foreign language at the undergraduate level. Such requirements frustrate the individuality and creativeness of students and take from learning that pleasure which is an intrinsic quality of self-directed and self-motivated education. We feel that the different needs and goals of individuals require different academic programs and that forced requirements are never in the best interests of either the individual or the institution.

Resolution of the Undergraduate Assembly (UGA), Princeton University, 1968

Although learning another language does involve skill and proficiency, we also see language as a critical point of entry into cross-cultural understanding. Enhanced language instruction would prepare students for deeper and sustained immersion in international contexts and give students the tools needed to more fully appreciate a different cultural worldview.


Introduction

The construction of language as a natural object independent of lived social activity, which served as the foundation for modern linguistics, is, according to Thorne and Lantolf (2007), debilitating. A fast-developing field of language research is
pushing a counter-narrative of languages as mutable, local, historically contingent repertoires that “people can use to realize their communicative intentions, to interpret the communicative intentions of others and, perhaps most importantly, to foster the conditions of possibility for transforming self and community” (p. 189). With the social and cultural turns in foreign language education, calls for teaching language and culture as integrated, shared, and situated practices have recurred for over two decades (Byrnes, 2002; Byrnes & Maxim, 2003; Kern, 2003; Kramsch, 2014; Paesani, Allen, & Dupuy, 2016). Forcefully put forward in the 2007 MLA Report “Foreign Languages and Higher Education,” these calls are nonetheless coeval with the emergence of the trope of profit, rooted in the reimagination of language as capital (Heller & Duchêne, 2012). These alternative narratives point to two competing approaches to collegiate language education: one that posits a continuum between language, culture, and literature (and positions language departments as central to the humanities) and the other that tends to treat language both as a commodity and a technical skill, setting language studies apart from other areas of academic study.

Foreign language departments often find themselves immersed in—and sometimes at odds with—the ubiquitous discourse of internationalization, the late modernist belief that universities should prepare students for an increasingly globalized, hyperconnected, intercultural world. Because of entrenched monolingual perceptions that value linguistic uniformity and credit a lingua franca—English—with simplifying communication across the globe, their role in the project of internationalizing the curriculum is far from straightforward (Byrnes, 2009; Hart, 2015; Warner, 2011; Watzinger-Tharp, 2014).

This chapter discusses these issues by outlining a recent attempt to reform the undergraduate curriculum, including the language requirement, at Princeton University. We believe that important insights can be gained from the proposed changes, in that they recast the role of languages in higher education by bringing together several pedagogic-discursive strands—namely, internationalization, multiculturalism, and civic engagement—to complement and enhance the language-as-skill approach that is still prevalent in the profession. Along with the examination of the language used in the documents produced for this particular reform and the underlying implications, we provide a fairly detailed description of the process by which a language requirement has been instituted and then changed over the last decades at Princeton (both through institutional and departmental efforts), which we hope will be of interest to those who are or will be going through similar programmatic reforms.

In October 2016, a General Education Task Force1 charged with reexamining Princeton’s general education requirements for undergraduate students issued a

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1 Ad hoc Committee composed of the Dean of the College, eight faculty members representing the four academic divisions of the University, and three staff members.
proposal to require foreign language instruction for all BA students, regardless of students’ existing proficiency. The Task Force also recommended that students be required to take at least one course with international content and one course that explores the intersections of culture, identity, and power. In January 2019, the Faculty Committee on the Course of Study\(^2\) endorsed the latter but declined to follow suit with the expansion of the language requirement, citing the “additional pressure that such a requirement would place on students” (Princeton University, 2016, p. 2). Despite the lack of support for the proposed extension of the language requirement, the discussion triggered by this initiative reflects an ideological shift toward an integrated view of cultural, literary, and linguistic studies that has been felt for some time in the language departments.

This article looks into the discursive tropes that are mobilized in the institutional debate about the role of foreign languages in the undergraduate curriculum. Institutional sites of discursive production are particularly relevant because they voice dominant ideologies about language education, have the power to create value, or, as the editors of the present volume put it, tip the ideological needle in a particular direction. By studying prevailing discourses and narratives, we are able to connect macro- and micro-phenomena, such as university-wide language policies and everyday classroom practices, and critically interrogate the field’s long-standing assumptions about the nature of language(s) and language learning. Imparted to both faculty and students, mission statements and instructional goals about target proficiency levels, desirable skills, and valuable content embody powerful cultural assumptions about what deserves to be taught and learned and what is of lesser importance. On the other hand, paradigmatic reforms do not always originate from governing bodies and administrative stakeholders. Neither do they trickle down, at least not exclusively, to those in charge of implementing them in the field. By discussing curricular renovations recently developed by the Spanish Language Program in our institution, we will attempt to show that language programs are also contributing to redefining educational priorities and reshaping the contours of a liberal arts education.

**Public Discourses on Language Education:**

**Internationalization and Cultural Awareness**

*Internationalization* and *cultural awareness* have emerged as undisputed tropes in the discursive landscape of second language education in late modernity. The former indexes the need to prepare students for a globalized, interconnected world,

\(^2\) The Committee on the Course of Study considers and recommends to the faculty appropriate action on all matters connected with the undergraduate program. It consists of nine faculty members elected by the faculty and represents the four academic divisions.
while the latter refers to the need to equip them with critical and analytical tools to understand different cultural, political, and social contexts and meanings. How do universities and language departments convey and respond to these perceived needs? What are the intersections and the implications of leaning into either ideological frame to conceptualize the mission of collegiate language instruction? Our discussion draws on Schieffelin and Woolard’s definition of language ideologies as “cultural conceptions not only of language and language variation but also of the nature and purpose of communication, and its role in the life of social collectivities” (Schieffelin & Woolard, 1998, p. v). We also rely on Schieffelin and Doucet’s observation that “language ideology is the mediated link between social structures and forms of talk, standing in dialectal relation with, and thus significantly influencing, social, discursive, and linguistic practices” (Schieffelin & Doucet, 1998, p. 286). The focus of our work on institutional discourses on language is therefore grounded in the notion that discourses produced within educational settings have significant material consequences for the ways in which language instruction is construed and organized (Demuro & Gurney, 2018; Ros i Solé, 2013). Whether they position language as a neutral object of study or as historically and culturally situated phenomena through which social practices are enacted and interpreted, ideological stances are embedded within instructional practices, and they are a product of their time. Finally, it should be recalled that ideologies of language are seldom about language alone, and that a myriad of extralinguistic constructs, “politically and morally loaded ideas about social experience, social relationships, and group membership” (Woolard, 1998, p. 9), are routinely imported into the theater of language.

To better understand the relationship between internationalization and the foreign language curriculum, we start by analyzing how language study factors into current efforts to internationalize colleges and universities and teach global and intercultural competencies. The concept of internationalization can have different interpretations across universities and for different constituencies within a university. Indeed, internationalization has become a catch-all term that can refer, depending on the context, to international student recruitment, study abroad programs, various forms of international cooperation and partnerships between institutions, and so on. An even broader interpretation views internationalization as the process of embedding an international dimension into the teaching, learning, and service functions of the institution as a whole, both at home and abroad (Knight, 2004; Middlehurst & Woodfield, 2007). Regarding internationalization activities at home, the 4th Global Survey on the Internationalization of Higher Education, issued by the International Association of Universities (IAU), found that while requiring a foreign language was most frequently ranked first among internationalization activities in the formal curriculum, North American respondents cited offering programs or courses with an international theme as their most important internationalization activity (Egron-Polak & Hudson, 2014, p. 7).
According to the *Global Learning VALUE Rubric*, published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) (2014):

[T]hrough global learning, students should 1) become informed, open-minded, and responsible people who are attentive to diversity across the spectrum of differences, 2) seek to understand how their actions affect both local and global communities, and 3) address the world’s most pressing and enduring issues collaboratively and equitably. (para. 1)

A recent paper in the AACU journal *Liberal Education* features the following assessment of current global learning initiatives in the United States: “Our rapidly changing world demands that undergraduate students develop global and intercultural competencies and that US colleges and universities embrace internationalization as an institutional priority” (Kinzie, Matross Helms, & Cole, 2017, para. 1). To sustain their claim, the authors cite the survey *Mapping Internationalization on US Campuses*, published by the American Council on Education (ACE), which found that the top three goals for internationalization reported in the 2016 survey are (1) to improve student preparedness for a global era; (2) to diversify the students, faculty, and staff at the home campus; and (3) to become more attractive to prospective students at home and overseas. They further refer to the National Survey of Student Engagement’s Global Learning Module, which showed that, among the outcomes of global learning, college seniors perceive the most gains in “encouraging a sense of global responsibility,” followed by “being informed about current international and global issues.” The smallest gains were associated with “speaking a second language” and “seeking international or global opportunities outside of one’s comfort zone” (para. 12).

These publications confirm that an international education is held in high regard in most academic quarters nowadays. But they also indicate that internationalization can be a double-edged sword. One would think that foreign language departments stand to benefit from the push toward internationalization (Watzinger-Tharp, 2014). However, the conspicuous absence of foreign languages in the earlier-mentioned discussions of internationalization or, at best, their marginal role in these discussions, underpins a pervasive monolingual ideology, often based upon dated notions of one monolithic, generic, one-size-fits-all English. In other words, preparing for a global society is critical, but there exists a pervasive belief that internationalizing the curriculum and ensuring that students become global citizens need not involve languages other than English. In a world of imagined linguistic uniformity ushered in by globalization, English risks becoming the neutral medium that can “translate and transmit ideas unproblematically without any modulation through cultural relativity, or without any recontextualization or resemanticization” (Park, 2016, p. 544). This stance sends mixed signals about our actual engagement as foreign language teachers and students in
the international community. The belief that English can achieve neutral and transparent communication is naive at best; to a certain extent, it can also be the by-product of a long-discredited streak of linguistic imperialism (Canagarajah, 2007; Saraceni, 2015).

The cultural turn in foreign language education represents the most significant attempt to date to introduce nuance, complexity, and relativity in the curriculum. As the foreign language profession directs its attention to the intersection between language and culture, considerable progress is being made toward a more reflective, historically grounded, and politically engaged pedagogy, based on multiple literacy frameworks (Byrnes & Maxim, 2003; Kern, 2003; Kramsch, 2014; Paesani, Allen, & Dupuy, 2016). In her seminal discussion of the role of culture in foreign language education, Byrnes (2002) noted that the renewed interest in cultural studies in foreign language departments represents an attempt to overcome a long-standing formalist tradition in our field and the concern with language as a system in order to bring the cultural dimension of language to the foreground and reimagine language as social activity. Byrnes raised questions about the precise nature of the relation between language and culture that are still relevant today: How can a relation that is initially probed in a single-language and single-culture context be expanded to accommodate the multilingual and multicultural contexts that characterize the work of foreign language departments? What distinguishes us from other departments dealing in culture? How do we establish not only our specificity but also our legitimacy vis-à-vis other disciplines university-wide? (Byrnes, 2002, p. 116).

A significant impediment to a strong integration of language and culture in the foreign language curriculum is institutional. The two-tiered structure that prevails in many language departments contributes to isolate “language” courses from “content” courses in foreign language departments (Modern Language Association, 2007; Swaffar & Arens, 2005). But perhaps a bigger obstacle lies in our overreliance on the idea of language education as a source of “added value” and as a “competitive advantage” in a global labor market and the subsequent treatment of language and culture primarily in economic terms. By way of example, the white paper “Languages for All? Final Report,” published by the American Councils for International Education (Abbott et al., 2014), argues that the value of a “language competent citizenry” ranges from:

immediately pragmatic—jobs and higher pay—to general education (cognitive advantages of bilingualism, literacy), to broader access to global information, resources, and people, innovative products and services (that more and more come from abroad), and finally to the most “esoteric” (well-rounded education). (p. 5)

The discourse of the marketability and the monetization of a particular type of practical knowledge encourages conceptually reductive views of language and can lead to the trivialization of foreign cultures. These phenomena have been
well documented in recent discussions of the foreign language textbook as an ideologically charged artifact that either disregards cultural meanings or seeks to depict a simplified, monolithic imaginary of the culture, akin to a tourist brochure (Bruzos, 2016; Kramsch, 2014; Ros i Solé, 2013). There is certainly a risk in promoting language learning while denying language and culture as legitimate areas of academic inquiry in and of themselves or labeling them “esoteric.” According to Warner (2011):

The ways in which we teach and research shapes public perceptions of our academic subjects. Teaching languages as practical skills or tools for effective communication in order to appear more practically relevant is intellectually dishonest, because it by no means captures the complexity and the power of language use and acquisition (see Block, 2002). It is also pragmatically risky as it allows our colleagues in other disciplines, administrators, and policy-makers to overlook our relevance to the loftier pursuits of critical thinking and literacy necessary to foster truly globally aware citizens. If basic language teaching is dismissed as a service enterprise with no substance, courses in literary and cultural studies are criticized as being substantially irrelevant. (p. 15)

Del Valle (2007) advances a different but related argument, namely, that the ideologue of languages as economic resources turns them into delocalized varieties inscribed in the semiotic realm of “the global” and assigns them a relative value and political appreciation according to their consideration in international linguistic markets (pp. 21–22). In a scenario where languages are appraised based on their potential economic yield, their intellectual and cultural traditions and values are relegated to the margins. This dislocation promotes a simplified, globalizing perspective on social realities around the world. Construing language as a commodity not only dispossesses language of its sociocultural complexity due to the mercantile need to hygienize, homogenize, and objectivize it but, by proxy, also eliminates it from the societies linked to that language.

The Articulation of Language, Internationalization, and Culture at Princeton

While the merits of learning a second language seem hardly in question, the ideological tension between treating foreign languages as a technical skill and approaching them as political and cultural entities has shaped discourses of language education for decades. In this section, we discuss the way in which Princeton University has implemented its language requirement and the current efforts from an institutional point of view to resolve what would appear to be mutually exclusive approaches. The following section offers the departmental response to these issues. By discussing the pedagogical practices that are currently being developed
in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, as well as the overall evolution of the language requirement at the university, we hope to provide both a holistic view of impactful discursive trends that originate at the level of the administration and concrete examples of teaching initiatives on the ground that can help practitioners tip the scales toward a more humanistic, less instrumental approach to learning a language.

Currently, the university requires BA students to take one to four terms of coursework depending on the language and the entry level. But if they have demonstrated proficiency in the form of advanced placement or “native” fluency in a language other than English, a student can graduate from Princeton without taking a single language course. A salient topic in the agenda of the Task Force charged with the strategic review of our general education requirements was whether we are meeting our goals to provide our students with familiarity with foreign cultures and an international perspective. After consulting with different campus constituencies (faculty, student body, administrators) through surveys and focus groups, studying the literature on developments in general education, and benchmarking data from peer institutions, the Task Force recommended that all students receive some form of language instruction, either by studying a new language at the introductory level or by taking a 200-level course in a language they already know. The proposed reform epitomizes the shift in the dominant discourse on foreign languages that has been underway at an institutional level at Princeton for a few years. This approach departs from the historical view that, on the one hand, acknowledged the importance of foreign languages in the context of cultural understanding and internationalizing efforts but, on the other, mostly merited it as a skill to be acquired outside of the university campus and deprived its instruction of the intellectual value that is openly recognized in other disciplines.

The paradox embedded in this position has accompanied the university’s view of the language requirement ever since it was made mandatory for all BA students during the 1966—1967 academic year.3 Prior to that, students had had an option between competence in mathematics and competence in a foreign language. A report by the Committee on the Course of Study (Princeton University, 1965) urged faculty to vote favorably on this proposal due to “the vital importance of foreign language study not only for citizenship and cultural breadth but also for advanced academic work in an increasing number of humanistic and scientific disciplines” (p. 9). The generalization of the language requirement was part of

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3 The history of language education at Princeton University prior to 1966 escapes the scope of this work. Suffice it to say that, as early as 1748, Princeton required its potential students to be proficient in Latin and Greek in order to be accepted into the institution (Leitch, 1978). Command of French and German would be added as a requirement to grant admission in 1896 (The Alumni Princetonian, 1896, p. 4), and the study of a foreign language (modern or classic) during Freshman year was implemented as compulsory in 1923 (The Daily Princetonian, 1923, p. 6).
a university-wide effort to prevent overspecialization and to ensure that undergraduate students would broaden their horizons as much as possible during their four years in college. However, the report also treated competence in a foreign language as a prerequisite, which, ideally, should be met before students arrive at the university:

Students and prospective students will be strongly urged to complete this requirement while in secondary school or through intensive summer study. In such ways, this prerequisite can be satisfied without cutting into other course selections, and the student will thus be equipped to explore, while still in college, the wider range of substantive intellectual pursuits available to those able to use at least one other language. (p. 10)

The separation between basic language instruction and more “substantive intellectual pursuits” in a foreign language endorses the disconnection between language on one side and culture and literature on the other side, which has dominated scholarly discussions and guided program reforms over the past decade. This report and the generalization of the language requirement that ensued acknowledge the need for linguistic proficiency, but they also downplay the relevance of language studies compared to other areas of academic specialization. As far as the language departments are concerned, the hierarchy thus reproduced glosses over the fact that language is the crucial element that brings us together as an academic community (Labrador Méndez, 2016, p. 70) and relegates it to a marginal space within the curricular interests of the institution and learners alike—something that, in turn, casts those in charge of language instruction as institutionally subordinate subjects. In his analysis of Spanish instruction and the cultural capital of the language in the United States, Bruzos (2016) points out that the subaltern nature of both foreign language classes and instructors “jeopardizes the intellectual legitimacy and institutional aspirations of the [FL] departments themselves” (p. 13, our translation). However, another side of this debate argues that if this vision were to prevail, research in literary and cultural studies could become—at least partially—a way to sublimate basic language instruction (Labrador Méndez, 2016, p. 59).

In their review of the Princeton undergraduate curriculum, the 1973 Commission on the Future of the College listed arguments conventionally used in favor of foreign language instruction in these terms: “American culture and education tend to be insular and command of a foreign language overcomes this provincialism by making other literatures and civilizations accessible,” and “in a world characterized by the interdependence of nations and increasing contact between peoples through travel and otherwise, a foreign language is often directly useful as a tool of communication” [emphasis added] (Princeton University, 1973, p. 177). According to these arguments, students benefit from access to foreign high
cultures and canonical texts (the lofty pursuits referenced in the document cited earlier), but they also need language for more transactional, utilitarian purposes. This text prefigures the dichotomy that would only grow in the following decades between the teaching of literacy (narrowly defined here as reading knowledge of a foreign language) and the teaching of the communicative skills that would dominate the pedagogical landscape of FL education well into the 2000s. It is worth noticing, however, that among the arguments against mandatory language study, the report includes the following:

Foreign Language Instruction, for all its merits, has no special claim as a general requirement since many of its putative virtues can be achieved in other ways. The study of Russian history and literature in translation, for example, is at least as revealing an introduction into the culture of the Soviet Union as the struggle with declensions. (pp. 177–178)

In assuming that one can “know culture” without “knowing language,” this passage draws attention to still unresolved tensions about the nature of the relationship between linguistic and cultural and literary studies. In privileging cultural knowledge through literature in translation, it denies language as situated human practice. But perhaps the most striking element of this argument is that it appears to offer an English-only solution to American insularity. By stating that the “putative virtues” of language learning can be achieved in other (monolingual) ways, the argument disregards the notion that every time we use a language, we engage in an act of local semiotic construction: “we inscribe ourselves in an existing geography of knowledge and confirm or alter its geopolitical hierarchies” (Labrador Méndez, 2016, p. 70). Stripping language study of every element beyond formal linguistic structure reduces it to a discipline for which the primary goal is the achievement of communication and not the circulation of knowledge, the understanding of cultural artifacts and their process of creation, and the intricacies of its sociopolitical dimension.

The proposals laid down by Princeton’s Task Force for General Education in 2016 signaled a change in this respect (Princeton University, 2016). The language used in the Task Force Report questioned the language-as-skill ideology that frames foreign languages as neutral tools for verbal transactions and sought to reinstate language education as a discipline of vital importance within the curricular design of the university as a whole:

Our current requirements treat foreign language as something of a skill, which sets it apart from the other requirements that emphasize the importance of different, largely disciplinary, ways of knowing. Although learning another language does involve skill and proficiency, we also see language as a critical point of entry into cross-cultural understanding. (p. 7)
By concluding that all BA students should undertake “some form of language instruction” (p. 7) at Princeton, regardless of their entry-level linguistic competence, the report introduced a shift from a form of certification in which the main goal is proficiency to a form of “enhanced instruction that would prepare learners for deeper and sustained immersion in international contexts and give students the tools needed to more fully appreciate a different cultural worldview” (p. 7). In our view, this represents a step toward the legitimization of language instruction at a curricular and institutional level by altering a policy that, as it stands today, makes the language requirement the only general education requirement that can be satisfied via advanced placement.

Another significant development coming from the 2016 Task Force Report for General Education concerns the university’s strong commitment to internationalization and the exploration of the intersections of culture, identity, and power. Along with the proposed extension of the language requirement, the Task Force made two other recommendations: (a) that all undergraduate students be required to complete at least one course that concerns either the history, culture, or social context of a nation or region outside of the United States or the study of international processes such as conflict, trade, and globalization; and (b) that all students take at least one course that explores the intersections of culture, identity, and power in a rigorous and intentional way. According to the Task Force, mandating students to take at least one course with international content “underlines our institutional commitment to international study, as well as the importance of international awareness in students’ intellectual development” (Princeton University, 2016, p. 8). This new distribution requirement, which can be satisfied with a 200-level (or higher) language course, was adopted under the label “Culture and difference” by the newly released Report by the Committee on the Course of Study.

However, as noted earlier, internationalization efforts may have very diverse interpretations across universities and for different actors within a university—something that can be further problematized when looking at the role of foreign languages in these processes. As Cameron (2002) points out, discourses on global communication tend to propose a version of “unity in diversity” in which the coexistence of multiple languages on an international scale does not pose a problem in and of itself. Rather, the problem arises when those languages “embody different or incommensurable worldviews.” Thus, for global communication to be effective, those profound disparities need to be leveled, regardless of the maintenance of a superficial linguistic difference, something that:

On the surface, ... preserves linguistic diversity, but at a deeper level the effect is to make every language into a vehicle for affirmation of similar values and beliefs, and for the enactment by speakers of similar social identities and roles. (pp. 69–70)
If we are to engage seriously with the lives of others, it is imperative to reconceptualize linguistic studies in ways that can promote a diversity of voices and contribute to a mutuality and reciprocity of engagement across difference (Stroud, 2018). The Task Force Report unequivocally clarifies the ideological drive that informs the institution’s position on this matter by recommending that all students take one course that addresses the intersections of culture, identity, and power as a means of:

signaling to our students—and indeed, to the larger world—that learning about and recognizing cultural difference is an essential part of a Princeton education. ... The ability to think critically across communities and identities—both within our nation and throughout the world—will be key for equipping a new generation of leaders to address and solve these problems. (p. 5)

This initiative, coupled with the recommendation to require all BA students to take language instruction, “further underlines our commitment to internationalism in the curriculum” (p. 7). As such, the proposals laid down by the report uphold the relevance of foreign languages in discourses of internationalization by rescuing them from the aforementioned marginal roles to which they have been relegated in favor of English as the globalized language that “connotes ‘Westernization’, ‘worldliness’, ‘liberalism’, ‘sophistication’, and ‘cosmopolitanism’” (Ramanathan, 2012, p. 66). By underlining their fundamental part in the achievement of cross-cultural understanding, the report reaffirmed the centrality of foreign languages in the pursuit of an internationalization that rejects and moves beyond ideologies of linguistic uniformity and cultural homogenization.

The Change from Below: Curricular Reforms in the Spanish Language Program

The emphasis on cultural understanding that is being enacted in the ongoing curricular evaluations is a welcome development that aligns with the programmatic reforms that the university’s foreign language departments have been carrying out in recent times. As already mentioned, the institutional dynamics between university-wide curricular reviews and proposals and concrete initiatives by language departments is not unidirectional. In many respects, the proposed improvements to the undergraduate curriculum are already underway in the language departments, as we expand our course offerings to areas of inquiry oriented around international study, culture, identity, and service, and as we redesign our existing courses with these educational priorities in mind. The statement in the Task Force Report that foreign language learning involves more than acquiring a set of skills echoes the work that we had already begun across
the Spanish language sequence. The creation of new syllabi that combine the focus on form, accuracy, and fluency typical of language classes with the focus on content, interpretation, and analysis typical of upper-level courses has had a spectacular impact in enrollment numbers and student engagement. From fall 2011 to fall 2016, our student population increased 120% in the post-requirement language sequence. That momentum has started to transfer to the upper-level courses in literature and culture, where the number of students and the courses offered have doubled and the number of majors has almost tripled. Interestingly, enrollment in the 100 levels has barely changed (a 3.7% increase in the same period of time). These numbers point to a higher level of retention for students who have completed the language requirement and a higher level of attraction for those who placed out of the requirement with their AP/SAT credit (Bono & Bilbao Terreros, 2018). The pedagogical innovations that have fueled these numbers have been implemented throughout the entire language curriculum. The following paragraphs offer some examples.4

In our accelerated beginning/intermediate course SPA103, students work with the target vocabulary and grammar at home, using the online language-learning platform *Aprendo*, designed exclusively for the Spanish Language Program at Princeton. Class time is devoted to interactive discussions that integrate the development of linguistic competence with an exploration of identity, cultural manifestations, and social change in the Spanish-speaking world. As a case in point, in a unit about shopping and clothing, students learn about *Galerías Pacífico*, a chic shopping center in Buenos Aires built at the end of the 19th century. Students “go shopping” at a store specializing in traditional Argentinian products. In class, they examine the relationship between consumer goods and cultural identity. Several weeks later, when studying historical events, they read about the use of *Galerías Pacífico* as a detention center for political dissidents during the dictatorship. In class, we discuss questions that engage critical thinking skills, such as “Why do you think those responsible for the deaths and disappearances have largely gone unpunished?” These interconnected assignments give students a chance to engage with questions of language and identity, providing them with perspectives that prepare them for their roles as global citizens.

The intermediate-level course SPA105 focuses on the impact of colonialism and neocolonialism and the relations of power among Spanish-speaking countries and the world. During the semester, students learn new grammatical structures and vocabulary while developing an understanding that language can be a tool to construct narratives that convey power imbalances and maintain cultural hegemony. In a unit on 18th-century Latin America, students review uses of the verbs “ser,” “estar,” and “haber” to express existence and location while

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4 We thank our colleagues Alberto Bruzos Moro, Nadia Cervantes Pérez, Andrea Faber, and Paloma Moscardó-Valles for sharing their course syllabi and materials with us.
exploring the concept of Casta paintings, an artistic genre used to describe and hierarchically organize the different groups of mixed-race individuals—known as castas—resulting from the unions of European, native American, and African populations. Students prepare for the class by reading about Casta paintings as a genre, in both English and Spanish. The lesson starts with a short group presentation on the topic, followed by the observation of several Casta paintings that students are asked to decode by answering questions such as “¿Qué/quiénes hay en el cuadro?”; “¿Dónde están?”; “¿Cómo son?” (What/who is there? Where are they? How are they?). The instructor then invites the students to compare the paintings and helps them reflect on how these visual practices, as well as the terms used to describe mixed-blooded people (mulatto, mestizo, pardo, sambo, etc.), draw a social taxonomy of colonial bodies based on their appearance, circumstances, and assumed inherent character, with the clear intention to reduce their access to certain privileges and impose economic and customary restrictions on them. The idea of language as a means for social and political control is further explored as the semester progresses through the study of pre-, post-, and colonial narratives, the examination of the symbolic linguistic order in multilingual territories such as Spain and the United States, or the problematization of the use of the Spanish language as the bond between Spain and Latin America. Thus, the course introduces students to the role of language in the construction of identity in the Hispanic world, paying special attention to its value in globalizing contexts.

Besides the revamping of the basic language sequence as illustrated by the examples earlier, our course offering has significantly expanded with the creation of new advanced courses that focus on community service, translation, or sociolinguistics. The expansion of the language program to these new areas of academic inquiry is a testimony to an increased awareness that language matters beyond the language requirement and an indication that institutional support for language programs is growing. A case in point is the creation of two courses: SPA204 Spanish for a Medical Mission in Ecuador, and SPA304 Spanish in the Community. Along with the proposal that students take at least one course that addresses the intersections of culture, identity, and power, the Task Force also supported a recommendation to offer courses that focus on service and civic engagement to help students “develop a coherent, structured approach to understanding and addressing community and global needs and concerns” (Princeton University, 2016, p. 9). SPA204 and SPA304 fulfill this goal by combining service-learning with Spanish language instruction. Both courses have received institutional recognition and have been met with great enthusiasm on the part of the students.

For further discussion of some of the programmatic and pedagogical reforms implemented in the Spanish Language Program at Princeton University, see Bono and Bilbao Terreros’ (2018) “Critical Transitions: Towards a New Spanish Curriculum.”
SPA204 is an advanced Spanish class that aims to prepare students for a medical mission in the indigenous communities of Ecuador. The course combines the instruction of specific medical vocabulary with an in-depth review of the linguistic features of the country, such as dialectal variety and the ubiquity of Quechua and other native regional languages. While students are introduced to Ecuador's ethnic and socioeconomic realities, they explore the role of traditional Andean medicine and other health-related topics, such as ease of access to medical resources, the presence of culturally adequate health services and facilities, and the impact of economic policies on the country's health system. Beyond the exposure to the linguistic and social makeup of the host country, the course also questions the ethics of medical missions and volunteering and problematizes the real impact that short-term medical missions and their personnel have by looking at issues of temporality, otherness, economic funding and expenditure, prevalence of prevention versus treatment, and medical tourism. SPA204 is aimed at premed students with the goal of familiarizing them with the linguistic tools they may need in their future careers as medical professionals. However, it also fosters awareness and acknowledgment of cultural differences and the important role that a perceived power imbalance plays in the relationship between a physician and a patient. Thus, this course moves beyond the traditional scope of a language course for specific purposes by shedding light on the importance of the conversation dynamics between the speaker and the listener and the sociocultural implications that may govern these interactions, both of which play as crucial a role in students' exchanges with others in Ecuador as the mastering of the language itself.

Offered for the first time in the spring of 2016, SPA304 Spanish in the Community blends service-learning with a focus on Spanish as an American language, an immigrant language, a language of identity, a contested language, and a language of opportunity. The course aims to address “painful but necessary questions” regarding the value of the language in the life of our communities, such as: “Why is Spanish seen as a resource for foreign language learners and as a detriment to the social mobility of Latino students?” (Bruzos, 2017, p. 39). Students partner with local Spanish-speaking community programs to learn about issues that are generally underrepresented in the Spanish language curriculum: social conditions like poverty and discrimination, citizenship and immigration issues, educational barriers, as well as common multilingual practices. Besides the service component (e.g., tutoring at Princeton Young Achievers, an after-school program run by the local YMCA), their assignments include writing service-learning journals and producing a narrative about an ancestor who first arrived in America or about a friend or person who immigrated to the United States. The latter requires them to conduct interviews and research historical documents and archives. By studying Spanish as a local language, SPA304 offers an opportunity to counteract politically disengaged and Eurocentric approaches to Spanish language teaching.
The newly designed courses called for the abandonment of generic manuals and textbooks in favor of original materials and assignments that would help us gain a better control of the pacing, activities, and topics covered in class. Curating and creating our own course materials demanded an interdisciplinary approach and sustained collaboration among the teaching faculty, some of whom are linguists and some of whom are specialists in literary and cultural studies. The process was instrumental in creating a global vision for the program, achieving intellectual continuity, and freeing instruction from cultural inadequacies and stereotypes. Furthermore, the benefits of courses that adopt content-based language teaching and situate the creation of meaning at the core of linguistic instruction extend beyond the program itself. Teaching our students the intricacies of a given linguistic system, providing them with the critical tools to understand the importance of contextual, cultural, and historical awareness, and building our classes around themes that foster those skills have department-wide repercussions. This approach to instruction reinforces a curricular alignment between language courses and traditional literature, cinema, and cultural studies classes by establishing concrete, direct, and practical links that help student transition between the former and the latter.

As we developed new courses and redesigned existing ones, a broader structural change happened at the departmental level with the creation of an internal committee formed by tenure-track faculty, lecturers, and graduate students. This created the conditions for a strong dialog among the constituents of the department and a melding of methodological and philosophical approaches to education between what would be traditionally considered the realm of the language program and the upper-level courses, respectively. Even though this committee has played a significant role in the development of a more cohesive approach to education in the department, in our experience, these conversations need not happen in a formal setting but can be the product of a more organic process, based on sustained collaboration and the search for synergies and a common goal. As the Princeton case shows, a stronger language sequence is the true foundation of a robust, cohesive curriculum that can prepare students to become successful Spanish majors as they continue their careers within the department.

In our case, the movement toward a more symbiotic relationship between language and culture tracks has been galvanized in a very significant change of departmental name, from “Department of Spanish and Portuguese Languages and Cultures” to simply “Department of Spanish and Portuguese.” According to Department Chair Pedro Meira Monteiro (personal communication, April 27, 2018), the old name reflected a certain anxiety to be recognized as more than a “service” department exclusively dedicated to the teaching of language as a “neutral tool.” However, it also construed language and culture as two independent entities that existed in somewhat exclusive terms. Finally, beyond the development
of new departmental structures, the constitution of the Princeton Center for Language Study as a point of contact for language faculty across disciplines and languages has been a key element in the creation of a community of practice and a space for intellectual debate that permeates pedagogical practices.

Conclusion

The Report of the Task Force for General Education emerges as a key document to understand how Princeton University as an institution envisions its role in the academic development of its students as well as the ways in which those students will relate to others in contexts of difference. In a document that substantiates and consolidates the university’s approach to internationalization, interculturality, and power relations, foreign languages occupy a preferential position. The report challenged a certain general perception regarding the value of language instruction and fostered the opening of a public debate on the matter. Upon its publication, the initiative garnered national attention with coverage from the mainstream press and specialized media, bringing the discussion about the role of foreign languages in higher education to the fore.6

In a more immediate and tangible manner, the report validates and upholds an approach to foreign language education that many of our language departments have already adopted and integrated in their curricula with success. In the case of the Spanish Language Program, the integration of language, cultural awareness, service, and a critical approach to content has yielded very satisfactory results for the last six years. As mentioned earlier, from the beginning of the curricular revision in 2012–2013 to the academic year 2016–2017, enrollment numbers at post-requirement levels have more than doubled and declaration of majors has followed a similar growth pattern.

Proposals such as the ones laid out by the Task Force Report are fundamental in legitimizing foreign language both as instruction and academic subject with an intrinsic value comparable to any other areas of knowledge and independent of perceived marketability. However, there is no certainty that the changes suggested by the Task Force will be implemented as they were originally conceived. Likewise, foreign language departments and programs in other universities may not see the same level of institutional support. For these reasons, it is imperative that language programs ensure their own relevance from both an educational and an institutional perspective by making a conscious effort to position themselves at the crossroads of internationalization, cultural understanding, and service. These are the areas of learning that have been identified as strategic priorities by universities and colleges, and they should be at the center of our pedagogical and scholarly preoccupations.

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As we work to promote an intentional and critically engaged examination of a sociopolitical world characterized by increased mobility, interconnection, multilingualism, and multiculturalism among our students, we must develop programs and courses that send a clear signal that language is not only a simple communicative tool for instrumental purposes but also a way to negotiate difference and critically assert and position oneself within a given context. Thus, exposing students to a variety of ways of not only speaking but also of being is crucial in the construction of intercultural awareness, particularly when the students themselves are imbued in processes of self-discovery and are starting to develop a perception of the “connections between themselves, their native cultural practices, alternative cultural practices, and the wider world” (Pegrum, 2008, p. 145). As we move forward, we have to recognize that institutional discourses of internationalization, interculturality, and civic learning can be empowering for language departments if we embrace them and make them central to our curricula. Ultimately, a sustainable change of paradigm requires both institutional commitment and support and renewed pedagogical models and practices that blend language learning with critical social and cultural awareness.

References


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