Foreign Languages Surviving and Thriving in Conventional University Settings: Implications for Less Commonly Taught Languages

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We are at an important crossroads in the history of foreign language learning and teaching in the United States. While the Federal Government has been involved in the project of language learning (or lack thereof) from its inception (Bernhardt 1999), it currently exerts an extraordinary influence on which languages can be and are taught in the United States. In fact, contemporary federal policy decisions have had an unprecedented impact not only on the curricula of universities and colleges that are funded for their language teaching efforts, but perhaps more interestingly, on the curricula of conventional universities. Conventional institutions are those post- secondary institutions that offer language instruction as part of the regularly taught liberals arts/humanities/arts and sciences curriculum without federal funding for those endeavors. Why is it important to make this distinction that portrays a two-tiered system? Because language programs located within conventional institutions have to compete with other credit accruing arenas within their own institutions and have to do so without any *special circumstances*. In the current climate, institutions that are not in the special circle of federally-targeted universities or if the institution is not participating in the foreign language in the elementary schools project, they are by and large shut out of the national discussion. This is a very disturbing trend and this paper will argue that it is particularly discomfiting vis-a-vis the less-commonly-taught languages (LCTL's). To use Philipson's (1992) language of *Linguistic Imperialism,* post-secondary institutions on the periphery of the national policy front and not at the core face significant challenges.

A case study of surviving and thriving

The Stanford Language Center was established in 1994, the result of an undergraduate curriculum review, which noted that the university should internationalize and smartly realized that serious language study had to be part of that process. There was much discussion and debate about language study at the time. A key issue was that academic programs across the university would not support a strengthened language requirement without assigning central responsibility for it. A general suspicion was articulated that language and literature departments themselves were not equipped to introduce an enhanced language requirement with integrity. Throughout all of the discussion and debate there was also an effort to eliminate the Special Languages Program (SLP). The Special Languages Program was the structure that housed all languages not attached to an academic major or program; i.e., the LCTL's. SLP was deemed an unnecessary expense and one that was easy (both politically and budgetarily) to remove from the university's spreadsheet. That was 1994-1995. Presently, academic year 2005-2006, the language programs are the largest sector of the undergraduate program at Stanford. Twice as many persons teach language than in that long ago and far away time and the budget for that teaching is 6 times its original size. That budget is also independent of the national literature programs. Fourteen languages are taught regularly and another 20-30 on a demand basis. The central staff that administers all of this has grown from a Director, an Assistant Director, and an administrative assistant, to include also an Associate Director, another administrative assistant, and now a manager. Enrollment has increased 20% beyond the required year. This is a story of surviving and thriving in a conventional setting. True, Stanford is a wealthy university, but also one dependent upon gift dollars and vulnerable to the vagaries of the stock market.

Surviving

Language programs in conventional settings are touched by *within* language stresses or tensions; by *between* languages stresses and tensions; and can be characterized by tensions between core languages and peripheral languages. Critical here is a concept of how

undergraduate programs in colleges and universities – public and private – are financed. Succinctly, they are financed by tuition dollars and funds provided by taxpayers. The distribution of these funds is by and large driven by enrollment and by the total number of majors and, to some extent, on scholarly (re: published) output. At a certain level this is a reasonably equitable way of looking at things: the more students enrolled, the more faculty being paid to instruct those students. Within this equation, however, national literature departments get into trouble because the student/teacher ratio is most often out of sync with reality. What often keeps the ratio impressive-looking is the language program productivity. If language program productivity is removed from departmental credit generation and enrollment figures, then literature programs are not perceived as productive either in terms of the number of credit hours they generate or in the number of students they produce as majors. They are, so to speak, financial deficits on the university spreadsheet.

Of course, genuinely serious universities would not suggest eliminating the German or Classics or Russian departments from the curriculum because of credit deficit problems. They are important elements in legitimate Humanities programs. Yet, expanding these departments is another issue. What annoys university administrators who have to examine the university in balance across all academic areas is the claim of literature programs (that more and more frequently do not offer courses in the cognizant foreign language) that they are of paramount importance to a liberal arts degree. Such programs often assert success when there is no reasonably acceptable yardstick to gauge that success. Further, these same programs many times willingly exploit the language programs for their own survival by averaging enrollment across all courses offered. When there are many students enrolled in the language program and few in the literature program, averaging enrollments provides the appearance of equitable productivity. Administrators who examine the actual numbers and perceive the imbalance in productivity tend to view the behavior of literature program administration as unsavory. To be realistic, there are not unlimited funds to meet every need / desire throughout a university. The sooner language programs and national literature programs come to realize this, the faster they will be on the road to thriving. All university programming is a struggle over limited re-

sources and the offering of languages must be understood in that framework.

The internecine economic question of core languages in competition with each other—who's more worthy: German or Russian? And shouldn't they band together to fight off the specters of Spanish and Chinese?—is next in the queue. This set of questions is then followed by the financing, the survival, of the core languages with regard to the "less commonly taught languages" (LCTL's). Actually, the term "less commonly taught languages" is a misnomer and should be replaced by the term "less commonly financed languages." What happens when Hindi is suddenly substantially larger than Russian? There is a natural resistance on the part of Russian to make room; does Hindi have the political clout to fight for itself within the university bureaucracy? Most often, it does not because such languages and such cultures in the periphery are often highly populated, under-resourced, and without political power.

A realistic understanding of survival in a curriculum that has forces pushing and pulling it is critical for the less commonly financed languages. It is tantamount to impossible to survive in a climate where the numbers—what would make columns black on the spreadsheet—are held by entities that are unable to defend or to express themselves and that those entities that *are* able to defend and express themselves traditionally protect *themselves* and not others. To be blunt, in the struggle for resources, entrenched curricular languages are often threatened by the specter of other "less-commonly taught" languages, fearing that their addition will mean subtraction for them. What is critical is for LCTL's to support languages long-established in the curriculum; in other words, LCTL faculty should *never* try to capture resources sitting under entrenched languages. This is the subtraction mentality that will only inspire ire. LCTL's need to cheer on the traditional languages and remind the university how important they are. Furthermore, it is equally critical, but probably much more difficult, for well-established languages to assist in *finding and infusing* new resources into the LCTL's or at least not thwart efforts to do so. This means that established language departments need to be proactive about the need for resources for new language programming. A proactive stance is indeed difficult because universities are rarely generous in either spirit or in reality.

Thriving

If survival lies in maintaining the old and trying to build newer languages, thriving on university campuses lies in the word *service.* Because of the service orientation of language programs, they are very distinct from the national literature programs. They service a much broader community and have a much more expansive mission. Language programs are not at universities to facilitate the study of national literatures. The literary project is just *one* of the things language programs do. And if that is *all* they do, they will quickly be ignored on campuses. In reality, thriving on American campuses means responsiveness to other fields and serving academic programs across the university so that students are prepared to conduct research and fieldwork in international locations.

A specific instance of responsiveness is an attachment to other programs or degrees. A concrete example from Stanford is the synergy between the International Relations program, the largest major at Stanford, and the language programs. Prior to the establishment of the Language Center, the IR program required two years of foreign language seat time for its majors. With the implementation of oral and written proficiency goals across languages as well as proficiency testing provided by and/or administered through the Language Center, students must demonstrate minimally an Intermediate High on the FSI/ACTFL scale. It is the Language Center that certifies that this requirement is met either by arranging a formal OPI *or* by having one of its staff members conduct an advisory OPI. This system means that languages and their administration are absolutely at the core of that major. Frankly, it took some bureaucracy out of the administration of the IR major and put it into the Language Center—something that was welcome on both sides. Another example is the interaction of the language programs with professional schools, namely, Business and Engineering. Each school is committed to and finances language sections especially configured for its students. Each set of students—Business and Engineering—is interested in in-country interactions. The School of Engineering, establishing an internship program with Google-China, is particularly insightful in that it has knowledge of Chinese as one of the criteria for competitive admission to the internship program. Stanford University is not

unique in this regard; all college and university campuses have programs and faculty that can become support systems for the less-commonly taught languages. Examples might be programs in Islamic studies; on Africa and the Pacific Rim, and so forth. A discussion that begins with "How can the language programs support your programs?" is a great way of garnering support.

Thriving also means responsiveness to students and modifying language programs to fit the interests and needs of students. A curriculum built around what students are pursuing academically and that results in courses such as Spanish for the Biological Sciences; Swahili for public health students wanting to do an internship in East Africa; or courses in Portuguese for Earth Systems students sends the message to students that the language programs are there for their benefit and can enhance their international experiences as well as their educational opportunities. Restructuring curricula and offering courses for student convenience takes financial and time resources. But as argued above, money and support within universities very often follow student demand. In addition to modifying the curriculum, embellishing it with enhancements that motivate students to take more language is important. An example is the development of a minor or certificate. Stanford developed a Minor in Foreign languages. Students who take two languages past the second year and include at least one upper-level literature class in each of the two languages may receive a minor. This has been perceived by students as a wonderful opportunity for them. Most importantly for the LCTLs/LCFLs: this new minor is supporting the less-commonly financed languages as well as creating a demand for much more than first-year instruction. Another idea is to offer an advanced language notation on the transcript so that students can demonstrate independent of their coursework what they can actually do with the language. The Language Center provides the financing for a telephonic oral proficiency interview as well as for writing skills. Again, students see this as a great opportunity and they feel like they are able to accomplish something.

Thriving, finally, comes from documenting productivity, acknowledging what programs can accomplish for both students and teachers and what its efficiencies are, and publishing/advertising that information aggressively. Publicizing accomplishments makes for an easier job for upper administration that is inevitably concerned with

student outcomes, with teaching quality, and with the level of commitment exhibited by the staff. The importance of each dimension of productivity cannot be overstated. Articulating what we do has been extremely influential in helping us to thrive. This is where we have garnered the most support from across campus.

Documenting and publicizing the performance standards accomplished by students is inspiring for students themselves and for their teachers. Undergraduates report that what they love about their foreign language courses is that they can trace what they are accomplishing (Light, 2001). They appreciate clear objectives that they and their instructors can follow and are relieved and gratified that they are not subjected to the "guess what I'm thinking?" kinds of student/teacher relationships that they often encounter in other Humanities courses. Publicizing performance standards also shuts down griping from the general public (within the university and beyond) about "well, you don't learn anything in foreign language classes anyway." On the contrary, publishing performance standards tells multiple audiences what students do and can learn in their foreign language classes. The fact that the foreign language profession has a set of nationally agreed-upon standards for oral proficiency is a powerful tool within a university and difficult for outsiders to denigrate.

Documenting teaching performance as well as professional development activity for the public at large is another critical component to thriving. This dimension that focuses specifically on teachers is incredibly important both for the self esteem of teachers and of programs, but also for structural power within the university. Providing explicit data—particularly about the very sensitive and actually threatening topic of teaching—is a great way of challenging other areas that are potentially likely to criticize, intimidate (such as any of the hard sciences), and to posture about their importance to the rest of the university. Furthermore, focusing on professional development puts language teachers on the same footing as medical doctors and engineers—professions that take additional training and coursework as a normal part of their professional trajectories. Again, the sets of national training standards (such as OPI certification or writing certification) need to be discussed, advertised, and implemented on campuses because they assist in leveling the professional/academic playing field. We know from research that the more

professional development teachers have, the better the performance of the students in front of them. The Language Center has a fully articulated program that consists fundamentally of MOPI (Modified Oral Proficiency Interview) training and its aftermath: financing the certification process; providing workshops in crossing major borders on the oral proficiency scale, the standards and so forth. A huge emphasis in salary setting is whether instructors have participated and how far along they are in their certification process. Critical is a professional reward system that acknowledges what the language teaching community values as substantial professional qualifications. It is difficult for university administrations to deny funding for professional development particularly if language programs can demonstrate results from the student oral proficiency performance and teaching evaluations. In the face of such data, it is difficult to argue that there is no direct benefit to the university.

To summarize: the path to thriving in conventional settings is strong vocal activity in each of these areas. We cannot proclaim we are great without evidence; doing otherwise in a climate of limited resources and a public concern for standards and productivity is non-credible. Thriving comes from advocacy from programs and persons *outside* the language area.

Vulnerabilities

In spite of these measures we might take to strengthen the LCTL's, the current Federal emphasis on foreign languages may well exacerbate the marginalization of conventional post-secondary language programs and that is not good particularly for the LCTL's. Two particular facets—the emphasis on child language learning and on study abroad programs—has some critical implications for the surviving and thriving of LCTL's.

The significant emphasis on K-12 and sometimes K-16 programs distracts from any potential financing and support for LCTL's. It will be at least 12 years for students from such programs (focused on any language) to be ready to use these languages in colleges and universities. That is two and a half administrations; probably several wars; and millions of dollars from now. Further, it is extremely difficult to prepare teachers to teach LCTL's. When the preparation of

teachers for elementary through high school is added to the mix, the virtually impossible is complexified under the best of circumstances. Importing foreign teachers as a solution to the teacher certification problem is naïve. National newspapers in recent years have publicized the many school districts across the nation that decided to open programs in an array of languages. Near to my campus, there is a call to start an elementary Farsi immersion program as well as to eliminate Spanish immersion in order to implement Chinese immersion. These calls are parent-citizens gone astray, trying to perform one good by eliminating another, or by working on a quick fix which is neither quick nor a fix. But most significantly, the research base for *why* these long-term programs might actually work is incredibly shallow. In fact, one reading of the research indicates precisely the opposite of what is being argued. It is adolescents and young adults who are the best language learners, not young children (Snow & Hofnagel-Höhle, 1978). In fact, some research focused on starting learners in 6th grade and then comparing them with learners from K-6 programs indicates that both groups are at the same level of language knowledge by the end of 6th grade (Harley, Allen, Cummins, & Swain, 1990; Lightbown & Spada, 2000). Research consistently indicates that pronunciation is the variable that places children ahead of adults. The world contains millions of individuals who speak a language with an accent and yet who are at the level of knowledge and fluency that we all desire in whatever language. Pronunciation is not the critical variable. Granted, some research suggests that for a native-like command of *syntax* to be acquired requires beginning before age 15; this evidence suggests a reason to seriously support junior high school and high school programs. For the sake of all language programs and most especially LCTL's, the foreign language community needs to demand that the same Federal rules be imposed on language programs that are demanded of literacy programs. Scientific comparisons of how far students can come within conventional settings (four/five days per week, one hour per day, as an example) for teaching foreign languages as opposed to how far along students are after a 13 year program are in critical need. The comparison is not specious. Given that data already exist, casting doubt on how much is actually learned in the first 6 years of schooling, it would be important to understand the balance and limitations on extended sequences. Relying on one

definition of extended sequence (i.e., 13 years of nine-month schooling) versus another (a ten week intensive summer experience) is not wise within a climate of limited resources. These kinds of comparisons might offer the profession, then, real insights into the opportunity costs of various models of language programs.

There is one further point to be made about K-12 programs. Suppose that that elementary school/high school program mentioned above actually does produce 100 speakers who are ready to enter a college/university program. Statistically, one of those students will be admitted to Stanford, two will enter the University of California system, and the other 97 (if they continue with their educations), will be scattered across maybe 40 other institutions, 30 of which will probably be community colleges. The really important question becomes whether there will be Farsi programs in those other 40 institutions. This is undeniably unlikely. And within the present Federal framework, there is no incentive financing to make sure that there are such programs. The current Federal direction sounds really positive, but can only be successful in communities that have well-established infrastructures for LCTL's and most certainly do not. The only serious language infrastructure available in the United States is in Spanish or Chinese. This leaves the LCTL's absolutely out in the cold where they have always been. And the bitter irony is that those are precisely the languages that need Federal support.

A second example of vulnerabilities exacerbated by current Federal policy is the dedicated funding for study abroad programs. Current policy has supported and encouraged funding for summer study in exotic places for high school and college students. At first glance, who could oppose such wonderful opportunities? On second thought, few if any of these programs listed have a language requirement. They are sink- or-swim immersion 6-10 week programs with no prior language exposure required. Yet, the research base implies that learners who are most successful are those who receive formal instruction before being placed into an immersion environment. Studying abroad without any prior knowledge of the language is extremely stressful. One tends to retreat. A more reasonable approach is to require some language preparation domestically, prior to starting a very, very important international experience. This argument traces back to the previous one: Many universities cannot afford to teach

the languages needed. These languages are therefore outsourced through these at-first-blush-great study abroad programs. But such programs help to insure that many of the less commonly financed languages will remain that way.

The Future of the LCTL's

On any issue, whether that is health care, nuclear weapons deployment, or language teaching, technical expertise at least in the United States resides in universities. These are in many cases the same universities that develop the information and knowledge necessary to meet current language needs. They are also the sites where students receive their interpretive training about how understandings developed through deep cultural analysis, both high and low, over extended historical periods, can be infused into current thinking on multiple critical international issues surrounding human well-being.

A national language policy is misplaced and misguided if it shuts these institutions out, pretending they are not there. These institutions provide the infrastructure for the learning of the LCTL's. The future is not in elementary school programs, as politically incorrect as that may be to articulate. The future is the brilliant college sophomore or junior, inspired by her public policy program to work on health education in Sri Lanka, who needs the attention and assistance and the language teaching community. It is this student, armed with her first language literacy knowledge; and yes, her knowledge of high school French and Spanish; and with knowledge and motivation to pursue a significant course of study, whom the language teaching community can bring quickly to a usable level of language ability so that she can reach the advanced level in a timely fashion. These are the students to be serviced by the LCTL's. These are the students and their teachers that we continue to leave to fend for themselves.

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