

## Language learning journeys and destinations: Are we there yet?<sup>1</sup>

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Benjamin Rifkin, *The College of New Jersey*

### Abstract

This paper reviews the state of foreign language learning outcomes in post-secondary education, considering research on learning outcomes conducted over the past 40 years, examining the shifting nature of the population of foreign language learners, enrollment patterns, the design of the foreign language curriculum, and the teaching and learning dynamic in the era of Facebook, with special focus on the post-secondary context. I argue that foreign language educators at the post-secondary level should take a long hard look at the structure of our curricula, the way they are articulated (or not) with secondary and elementary foreign language programs, and the way in which we establish learning outcomes goals, teach toward them, and assess and document our students' foreign language successes. These measures will help the foreign languages field reposition itself at the center of the American college liberal arts education.

### Introduction

When I was a small child, my family would periodically undertake what was to me an epic journey from the suburbs of New York City to a community on the Jersey shore, not far from Atlantic City, to visit with relatives. Of course, as a small child in the back seat of a car on what seemed like an interminable trip, I would ask periodically,

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**Benjamin Rifkin** (Ph.D., University of Michigan, Ann Arbor) is Professor of Modern Languages (Russian) and Dean of the School of Culture and Society at the College of New Jersey. He has taught Russian language courses at the first- through fifth-year college levels, served as director of the Russian language program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for fifteen years and as director of the Middlebury Russian School for four years. His research interests lie in applied linguistics, second language acquisition, and foreign language education. An ACTFL-Certified Oral Proficiency Interview Trainer in Russian, Rifkin has published articles in *Foreign Language Annals*, *Modern Language Journal*, and *Slavic and East European Journal*, as well as several book chapters, two edited volumes, and two textbooks for Russian.

“Are we there yet?” My mother would calmly respond that we still had so many hours or minutes to go before arriving. As I grew, with each passing year I came to recognize more and more milestones on the journey, measuring our family’s progress on the trip there and back: the never-ending toll booths, certain signs on the highway, and our exit on the Garden State Parkway.

The question “Are we there yet?” lingers in my mind to this day. The question consists almost entirely of deictic expressions clear only from context. But the trip, made twice annually, had a clear context shared by all its participants:

- “We” are the family members in the same car;
- “There” is the home of my Aunt Janet, a destination clearly marked on the map at the end of a well-marked road;
- “Yet” refers to the time already traveled in the context of the larger expectation of a 3-hour trip that could be made somewhat longer by traffic; and
- “Are” is a referent to the commonly shared understanding of the mode of travel, the automobile in which we were moving at a rate of 50 miles per hour.

Transposing this question to the study of foreign languages in American institutions of higher education we confront the problem that the answer to the question of our destination is often unclear for most of the participants in the process.

**There**

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examination of the concept of *there*, the intended destination of the language learning journey. Unfortunately, despite important and significant work on this issue in ACTFL and the AATs, as evidenced by both the proficiency guidelines and national standards for foreign language learning (National Standards Collaborative, 2006) — documents that should be the envy of many other academic disciplines — there is still no consensus on the goal(s) of foreign language learning. Are we as teachers working with students so that they can acquire flawless pronunciation and pass for native speakers? Are we teaching the next generation of Cervantes and Baudelaire scholars? Is our primary focus to help our students understand the difference between *ser* and *estar*? Or to help our students understand what this difference means for a native speaker of Spanish? Are we teaching our students to behave in culturally appropriate ways in Dakar? Are we

teaching them to be more sensitive to the linguistic and cultural diversity of the United States, a civic goal in alignment with the larger purposes of the liberal arts education in which we, the foreign language profession, participate? Are we teaching our students to interact and communicate with speakers of other languages, both in the United States and abroad, both in person and in technology-mediated contexts? These are but a few

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of the questions we have not answered, not only in our profession, but also in our programs, departments, and colleges.

Indeed, looking at the titles of articles in our professional journals and the presentations at our professional association conferences, it is clear that debates on the balance of fluency and accuracy, grammar and culture, speaking and writing, listening and reading, group work and whole class activities continue to take up much of our time and attention. Debates on these topics sometimes omit the impressions of our learners, who may have unrealistic expectations about their learning outcomes and whose goals and motivations for studying a language may be very different from ours. For instance, “my girlfriend’s parents don’t speak English, so I want to learn their language” [implication: only as long as our relationship continues to be viable] or “this class fits in my schedule and I need 3 more credits,” or even “my boyfriend is taking this class and I want to take the same class as he does.” Then there is the student who wants to use German in her future job as a neurosurgeon. In short, teachers and learners in the foreign languages learning/teaching dynamic often lack a shared understanding of the meaning of *there*.

*There*, indeed, is a complicated concept for us also because we often do not have consensus about program goals within each of our programs. Unlike many other academic disciplines, the foreign language profession has widely accepted documents constituting a developmental framework for learning and teaching from pre-school through the attainment of language proficiency that typically occurs only after the completion of the bachelor’s degree (e.g., superior and distinguished level skills): the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, the national standards for foreign language learning, and the *Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners*. Yet foreign language faculty within the very same program often work at cross-purposes with one another while students in that program move from one course to another without progressing in what should constitute a curriculum, an intentionally sequenced series of learning events. For example, some programs use a communicative textbook in the first year, a grammar-translation textbook in the second year, provide a conversation-focused course in the third year, and a literature-focused class in the fourth year. This is not a curriculum, but a collection of courses arranged in a sequence like hurdles on a track. Indeed, the design and placement of the hurdles in each section of the track seems to be left in the hands of discrete and isolated groups of people (graduate student teaching assistants, lecturers, tenure-stream faculty), each of which is responsible only for one section of the track, as discussed by Byrnes (2001), Swaffar (2006), and in the MLA Ad-Hoc Committee’s Report on Foreign Language Education (2007).

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The disconnect within foreign language programs in higher education has many sources. Unlike the K-12 sector, we do not have mandated standards or curricular outcomes we must achieve in accordance with state law. Of course, as a profession we are all too well informed that in many cases the mandated curricular standards and

achievement benchmarks imposed in the K-12 sector have not had the desired effects. Each of us in higher education teaches by virtue of a kind of license, a combination of a degree and our proficiency in the target language, proficiency that in some cases is assumed, rather than documented. (Not all graduate programs in the foreign languages test their graduate students in the target language and/or require certain levels of language performance as a degree requirement.) Throughout higher education, there is an implicit understanding that teachers have autonomy to teach as they see fit; this is the premise of academic freedom. If I want students in my second-year course to have a solid understanding of ballet and dedicate numerous class hours to watching ballet in class, not discussing, but watching it, it may be difficult for the instructor of the third-year class to move forward on a syllabus that focuses on anything but ballet. We often draw up our course plans without consultation with those who teach our students in the previous course in the sequence or in the course that follows ours. Many of us may not consistently or consciously link course plans or lesson plans to curricular or programmatic goals, let alone to the goals of a liberal arts education or our institution's mission. Few graduate programs model collaborative approaches to curricular planning (from the beginning of the first-semester course to the final examination in the capstone course in the fourth-year class), so graduate students have little opportunity to participate in such a collaborative curricular planning process. In

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short, there is little understanding of the goals of language learning, or, in the words of Gertrude Stein, there is no **there there**.

Unfortunately, the situation is even more complicated. In many institutions, there are no assessment practices in place in order to determine where we arrive at the end of one, two, three, or four years of instruction. Where there are assessment procedures, these are not necessarily informed by collaborative articulation of programmatic learning objectives. In other words, if we did indeed get “there” at the end of a program of instruction, how would we know it? Imagine my family driving aimlessly on the Garden State Parkway, perhaps tragically driving off into the Atlantic Ocean, because we had no clearly marked map, no global positioning system (GPS) device reminding us when to turn left, or that we will arrive at our destination in 250 feet. Without data on the performance of student cohorts at certain milestone points in the curriculum, it is impossible to know where **there**

is and how close we are to **there**. All we know for sure is that our students graduate after four years. This is not so much an arrival at a destination, as it is running out of time for the journey. To return to my original metaphor, imagine, if you will, that my family set out on the Garden State Parkway to get to the Jersey Shore, got as far as New Brunswick, not quite 50% of the intended journey, and gave up because we had run out of time. Indeed, some programs in the K-12 sector that are losing state funding are replacing live classroom teachers with software programs (for example, Rundquist, 2010). Without assessment data, faculty and administration in those programs have

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no evidence to prove that student use of software three to five hours a week without classroom instruction yields language learning results comparable to those obtained in the same number of hours working with a classroom teacher. Furthermore, as Schulz (2006, p. 255) has argued, without a clear articulation of our goals and assessment to document whether they have been attained, we are unlikely to be working with students who will take our goals, or our foreign language program, seriously.

Language learning journeys are each different, given the nature of the learner, the teacher, the language being studied, and the environment in which it is taught. Indeed, given the challenges of teaching orthography in Arabic or Chinese, let alone the pragmatics of cultures that are very different from those in North American speech communities, language learners and teachers working in Arabic or Chinese clearly need a sustained sequence of carefully planned learning opportunities and experiences. The question of time compels us as language teaching professionals to consider the most important question of curricular planning: what do we want our students to be able to do with their language skills when they complete a major or minor in a foreign language given that the time we have with our students is finite? In

the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth century, the answer was clear: our students must be prepared to read the great works of the Latin or Greek literary canons in the original. The study of modern languages began to muddy those clear waters; the rise of behaviorism led many in the foreign language field to emphasize transactional oral/aural skills, reducing, in some cases, the importance of literacy skills. Recent research in this area (e.g., Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsberg, 1993 for Russian; Magnan, 1986 for French; and Tschirner, 1996 for German) suggest modest outcomes for foreign language learning at the college level, with students typically attaining only Intermediate-level proficiency after four years of classroom instruction if they do not participate in a study abroad or domestic immersion experience.

What is it, then, that we want foreign language students to be able to accomplish in the time they have in our classroom? How will we spend our precious time with them? This is the crux of curricular planning. It requires careful consideration of the perspectives of all participants in the learning/teaching dynamic including students and instructors at all levels, as well as prospective employers and alumni. The best foreign language programs in the world are those with explicitly articulated and shared goals. The development of such goals is not an easy or quick project: it requires careful reflection and discussion involving all the stakeholders in the learning-teaching dynamic, as recommended by many scholars, including Steinhart (2006) and this writer (Rifkin, 2006). From the articulation of goals comes the development of resource plans and staffing allocation as well as the development of assessment instruments to monitor the achievement of those goals. If the foreign language enterprise is worth our life energy, then it is worth planning, in the sense of a collaborative effort of all those invested in the process.

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In the world outside our classrooms, we all commonly review performance in accordance with clearly established criteria. For instance, if I did not like the way those apples tasted, I will buy different ones the next time I am at the store. We similarly invest

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significant energy, effort, and resources in our teaching; yet as a profession, we often do not regularly assess the performance of our *programs*, in the context of learning outcomes, in a comprehensive and systematic way, outside of the NCATE accreditation process. Indeed, institutionally based program reviews often consider a broad range of benchmarks, such as enrollment data, scholarly productivity of the faculty, placement outcomes (graduates with jobs or placed in graduate or professional programs), but they less frequently include data on learning outcomes in the post-secondary context as evidenced by the relative paucity of learning outcomes studies in many language fields. The similar lack of data on

learning outcomes posted to departmental websites (e.g., “evidence of our success”) is typical of post-secondary education more broadly, as discussed in a June 2010 report issued by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (Jankowski and Makela, 2010). Indeed, stories about incoming college freshmen who had studied a language for four years in high school being placed into the first- or second-semester language course in college are legion. These stories also suggest a lack of consensus about the goals of language learning, in this case, lack of consensus among high school teachers and college faculty. If students are repeating classes, we need to understand why. A pattern of repeated classes has implications for the allocation of budgetary and personnel resources. Furthermore, this pattern sends a message to students and parents that the secondary school foreign language programs are not successful and therefore may well be eliminated or reduced in the next budgetary crisis.

Indeed, foreign language professionals at all levels must communicate with one another and with our students about our and their expectations of and aspirations for student learning, especially in the context of reduced budgets and financial constraints. Then we can begin to monitor whether our curricula actually promote the objectives we pursue. Discrepancies between our stated goals and students’ actual performance may suggest either that we should pursue other goals or that we need to change some aspect(s) of our work with the students. In either case, we need data to be able to make informed decisions. If we do not ask the questions, collect and analyze data, consider conclusions drawn from our analysis of the data, we will not be able to construct a map, let alone follow one, that will show us how to get from “here” to “there.”

## Yet

The temporal adverb **yet** in our touchstone question, “Are we there **yet**?” is the source of many problems in curricular design for foreign languages. It implies arrival at a destination within a certain anticipated period of time. In my childhood journeys to my aunt’s house, my family did, indeed, share a common sense of that period of time: three hours, plus or minus, given the traffic. Our students have different goals for language learning and each of them is associated with different time frames for

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achievement. Some students want to complete a college's foreign language requirement; that is easily timed in requirements based on "seat time," the completion of a certain number of semester hours in formal classroom instruction, regardless of the outcome. Some students want to be able to learn something about their ethnic roots; does that take one, two, three, four years or more? It is even harder to describe the attainment of fluency or adequate preparation for matriculation into a graduate program. What does it mean to complete a major in the language and culture? Indeed, many students have unrealistic beliefs about the attainment of fluency and these beliefs vary by language studied (Rifkin, 2000).

The fact that American students have unrealistic expectations about foreign language learning is not surprising. American culture is permeated by evidence supporting the idea that languages can be easily "picked up." Characters in films and television programs suddenly reveal expertise in a language necessary to solve a crime; these characters' biographies rarely provide any indication of hours and months of hard work acquiring the language. The seat back pocket in front of you in the airplane may be too small for you to slide your water bottle into it, but it is big enough to carry an in-flight magazine with advertisements for CD-ROMs for sale, technology that will help you speak Spanish like a diplomat. The idea behind these CD-ROMs is absurd: you can just passively listen to some random audio files and "pick up" the language you need without dedicating effort to do so.

The current economic challenges in higher education present the foreign language field with a dilemma. Just as we are losing faculty lines and in some cases, language programs, we are at the same time in an expansion mode with more students of more languages (e.g., Arabic, Chinese, Hebrew, Hindi, Italian, Korean, Portuguese, Urdu, to name just a few), and more kinds of language courses (including heritage language courses and courses on language for special purposes), as well as a host of new kinds of learning materials, than might have been observed 20 years ago. However, we still have only four years in a bachelor's degree program and only some of that time can be dedicated to foreign language study in the context of the American liberal arts curriculum. Indeed, one can imagine a giant countdown timer looming over the campus that is set every fall semester with the arrival of the new cohort of freshmen. Some of them have had high school language experience they can build on in the post-secondary curriculum, while others are heritage speakers of the language they are studying. Still more know a language closely related to the one they are studying. Of course, a large number of students have no relevant previous experience in their target language; these are the "true beginners." We can take them only as far as we can take them in the time we share with them. The United States Department of State and the Defense Language Institute (DLI) have studied data on language acquisition and have classified world languages by difficulty for native speakers of English with no knowledge of a language related to their target language. As reported by Omaggio-Hadley (2001) and Jackson and Kaplan (2001), scholars working in the United States Defense Language Institute have divided world languages into four difficulty categories for North American learners who are native speakers of English:

- Category 1: Romance languages, Swahili, Dutch, Scandinavian languages
- Category 2: German, Indonesian, Hindi, Hebrew, Bulgarian
- Category 3: Russian, Czech, Yoruba, Thai
- Category 4: Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Korean.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, according to US government estimates, it takes only 300-some odd hours to attain a certain level of fluency (see Omaggio-Hadley above, and Jackson and Kaplan, 2001) in a category 1 language, but over 700 hours in a category 3 language and over 1100 hours in a group 4 language. These findings were confirmed for French by Magnan (1986), for German by Tschirner (1996), and for Russian by Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsberg (1993), Thompson (1996), and Rifkin (2005). The data create a tableau that makes very clear to all foreign language professionals the importance of study abroad for our students because the data prove that immersion is the only way for foreign language students to attain proficiency above the intermediate level.<sup>3</sup>

**We**

Returning for a moment to my touchstone question, “Are we there yet?” it is time to turn to the question of who are **we**. On the face of it, **we** should be clear in our foreign language metaphor: it is our students. But our students today are more diverse than ever before. They come to the foreign language enterprise with as diverse a range of motivations as their skin tones, their socio-economic backgrounds, their language learning backgrounds, their expectations of the language learning experience, their learning styles and preferences, and their language learning aptitudes. **We** also includes us, the teachers, with the full range of our teaching interests, styles, and passions.

Who are our students? Who are our potential students? At some universities faculty and staff have begun asking incoming freshmen what languages they speak or spoke in their homes and have learned that many of our freshmen speak or spoke a language other than English in their homes. This impression is also confirmed by the MLA Language Map of the United States (2010), which shows the diversity of languages spoken in homes throughout the country. The situation varies all over North America, but in addition to Spanish, we have many students who speak a dialect of Chinese, a South Asian language, Hmong, Korean, Russian, or Ukrainian, or a language of West Africa. These data suggest that we should be considering heritage language programming not only in Spanish, but in some of these other languages as well.

Brecht, Caemmerer, and Walton (1995, p. 72-73) defined four different missions for language teaching: the liberal arts mission (students who want to broaden their understanding of the world and its cultures), the ethnic heritage mission (students who want to learn more about their roots, whether close or distant), the instrumental or applied mission (students who want to use the language in non-teaching positions in the workforce), and the specialist mission (students who want to join the professoriate and become the next generation of professors teaching the given foreign language). Our students, themselves, subscribe to different missions. In joining our students in the classroom, are we able to join them as “we” with a shared sense of mission? Have we designed our curriculum in order

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to address the needs of only one of these missions, but not the others? Indeed, can one unified curriculum serve the needs of students with different language learning missions? Elsewhere (Rifkin, in press) I have written about the discrepancy between the missions to which our students subscribe and the curricula in which they are enrolled, comparing data from a survey of nearly 900 students of different languages at several different institutions with the design of foreign language majors at over 30 colleges and universities.

Indeed, teachers are part of the “we” as well and teachers’ sense of mission and purpose must be considered in the articulation of learning goals. To that end, instructors must collaborate with one another and other stakeholders on key issues of program design. This is very difficult, of course, because in many programs, part-time instructors or graduate student teaching assistants are hired and deployed without much mentoring; in other programs, beginning faculty members without substantial training are hired into tenure-track positions. In still other programs, some senior faculty members, with tenure, do not keep up with the latest research on foreign language education. Do all these instructors share the same beliefs as those who hold the doctoral degree? Do those different groups of instructors meet to discuss their beliefs and their sense of purpose within the larger foreign language program? Can we be certain that the instruction provided by any of these groups helps students to move forward toward the elusive **there** especially if **there** has not been clearly defined and may, in fact, be three or more different language learning destinations for each of these groups of instructors? As teachers we must be conscious of the **we** of this formula. We must consider our teaching in the most careful way, considering our students, their learning needs and learning styles, our program’s goals, the latest research in applied linguistics and second language acquisition, the availability of technology and its suitability to attaining learning goals, the needs and concerns of our teaching colleagues, and other factors. We must also be ready to observe and evaluate teaching performance on a number of different criteria, to mentor beginning teachers to achieve their full potential as instructors, to engage more senior faculty in considering new approaches to teaching, and to be inspired from the observation of good teaching from instructors at any stage of their career. In this regard, we must be careful not to impose our own teaching styles on other teachers, but to encourage them to discover how to be the best teachers they can be. Programs should establish systems for mentoring beginning teachers, encouraging them to visit the classes of other instructors who are identified as successful classroom practitioners, not only the observation of junior faculty by senior faculty. Clearly articulated mentoring programs should help all instructors develop their own pedagogical approach(es) and strategies for attaining them.

### Are

The first word of our cornerstone phrase, “Are we there yet?” is the verb, “**are**,” the last word to be analyzed in this discussion. In the journey to the Jersey shore, that verb stands in for the process of driving in a private automobile at a speed of about 50 miles per hour. What is expected of learners and teachers with regard to the processes of learning and teaching? Many students may have the expectation that the outcomes of learning can be attained without effort merely by using new technologies. For instance,

“if I listen to the dialogues on my iPod twice a day while I am tired and on the verge of falling asleep, it will be enough for me to become a fluent speaker of Spanish in the course of three class hours per week for two academic semesters.” There is nothing in the research that suggests that this kind of approach is productive for anyone. In fact, many foreign language instructors believe that learning a language is not significantly different from learning to swim, learning to drive, learning to play basketball or learning to play

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the piano because, as explained in the old joke about New York, the answer to the question “How can I get to Carnegie Hall?” is always “Practice, practice, practice.” Indeed, one of the most important factors for language learning success is time on task. As teachers, therefore, we must construct our courses in such a way to make certain that our students invest that time. To the best of my knowledge, it still has not been proven that time spent completing web-based activities is in any way better than time spent completing exercises in a traditional lab manual or workbook, but one can guess that the students who are engaged with Youtube and Facebook and Twitter, let alone SecondLife, are more inclined to choose

interactive work on their computers rather than more traditional work with pen and paper workbook exercises. Integrating technology-based learning tasks may help seduce our students to spend more time on task, and doing so is often in accordance with an institutional goal of promoting technological literacy for all its graduates.

In the comparison journey, we were driving in a vehicle, with a map, using known (if limited and ever more costly) resources. When it comes to discussing classroom instruction, it seems that there is some consensus on the kinds of activities that constitute productive learning tasks at the lower levels of college foreign language instruction if one is to judge on the basis of textbooks published for the commonly taught languages. Indeed, the research on language learning outcomes cited above (Brecht, Davidson, Ginsberg, 1993; Jackson and Kaplan, 2001; Magnan, 1986; Omaggio-Hadley, 2001; Rifkin, 2005; Thompson, 1996; and Tschirner, 1996) suggests that students can rapidly progress from not being able to function at all in the language to being able to function at the Intermediate level. The next step, however, from Intermediate to Advanced, seems to be a very steep one. Students of Russian, for example, typically do not achieve Advanced-level proficiency without over 700 hours of instruction; students of Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean typically do not attain this level without over 1100 hours of instruction, or almost three times the number of classroom contact hours (400) available for a typical college foreign language major. The range of published materials for Advanced-level instruction is meager compared to materials available at the Novice and Intermediate levels, perhaps because publishers see fewer profits in the Advanced market, especially for languages other than ESL or Spanish. If interaction in the beginning-level classroom can be focused on sentence-level discourse, interaction at a higher level needs to be different because at that level we are encouraging students to strive for paragraph-length discourse or longer. This has significant implications for the nature of classroom turn taking, the orientation of the texts we assign our students to read and listen to, as described by Child (1987), as

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well as content in upper-level classes as Malone et al. have described (2004). Each of these factors shapes the process of learning and teaching. It is of critical importance to remember the wide range of interests of our students and make connections to other disciplines, as suggested by the national standards for foreign language learning, to focus attention on the study of our target cultures in the broadest possible context. It is essential to engage our students in the study of the texts that shape and reflect the mindset of the people who live in the cultures we teach: the place of Molière, Goethe, and Cervantes in our curricula is secure. But we should also expose our students to other aspects of the cultures we study. For instance, our students' learning experience is enhanced by taking up the analysis of controversies in our target cultures, reading about the economic expansion and environmental concerns in Korea, women's rights and traditional cultural practices in the Middle East, media ownership and freedom of expression in Russia, and questions of memory, justice, and reconciliation in any post-totalitarian culture. In the discussion of these contemporary issues, students not only learn about the historical and cultural contexts in which these arguments unfold in the target cultures, but they can also compare their analysis of the target culture with their understanding of American society. Students can be encouraged to reach out to target-culture communities in the campus area, on-line in the target culture itself or around the world, to ask native speaker interlocutors about their impressions of these issues.

## **Conclusions: Are We There Yet?**

The future for foreign language instruction in the United States looks both very promising and challenging.

We continue to enjoy teaching students who seek instruction in foreign languages and cultures to read a favorite author in the original, while welcoming students interested in working with language skills in the private, public, and non-profit sectors. Study abroad opportunities are greater in number and broader in type than ever before; there are now study abroad programs with service learning opportunities, internship opportunities, home-stays rather than dormitory experiences, and more and more scholarships available to bring these opportunities within reach of our students. Indeed, study abroad opportunities now attract students to our language curricula, rather than only the other way around. The Internet brings our base culture and our target culture closer than they ever were before with social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter, operating not only in the United States but also in many of our target cultures, as well as other websites at which our students interact with others in the target language, such as SecondLife. Heritage communities send us their children and welcome our students to their cultural events. Students and institutions have more opportunities to win federal scholarships and grants to support foreign language instruction, especially for languages spoken outside of Western Europe.

Of course we face numerous challenges, too. According to a national survey on foreign language teaching in American K-12 schools (Rhodes and Pufahl, 2009) administered by the Center for Applied Linguistics in collaboration with Westat, a statistical survey research organization, with funding from the United States Department of Education, there have been substantial reductions in language offerings at the elementary level and in certain languages (French, German, Japanese, and

Russian) at both the elementary and secondary levels. These reductions have likely already had an impact on enrollment patterns in the post-secondary sector. Language programs once vibrant, in part due to enrollments flowing in from the high school level, may find themselves in dire straits. Deans and provosts look closely at the number of majors graduating each year as a key factor in the allocation of resources, and notifications of language program closures seem to occur with greater frequency. Retired tenure-stream faculty are not being replaced or are being replaced by part-time instructors whose commitment to growing the language program may be as limited as the time for which they are paid to teach our students.

In the context of these challenges, we should and must engage in the pressing work of building consensus on the design of our curricula. I recommend that we take the following steps:

1. Bring together language faculty at all ranks, undergraduate and graduate students, alumni, teachers from the K-12 sector, community (heritage school) teachers, prospective employers, and colleagues from area studies disciplines to articulate the goals of our foreign language programs.
2. This group should articulate backward to the benchmark moments of the completion of each of the preceding three years of instruction at the college level and develop and implement appropriate assessment processes to evaluate instruction at each benchmark moment.
3. We should identify weaknesses in our curriculum, as evidenced in assessment data and work together to address them (e.g., by deploying different kinds of learning tasks, enhancing curricular articulation, improving instructional practices, and/or developing and/or adopting new materials).
4. We should demonstrate our students' success to the larger academic community as well as to the community at large.

Certainly there are programs where such processes are already in place; they are to be commended and emulated. I must also emphasize that is not my intention here to suggest what any given program's learning outcomes should be: each language program exists in its own context and the participants (learners, instructors, administrators, alumni, potential employers, members of prospective graduate school admissions committees) in each language program have their own unique goals and interests. In articulating their own program's learning outcomes goal, they will address the most important challenges for us as foreign language educators: (1) building support for longer sequences of instruction; (2) placing our curricula at the heart of the liberal arts mission — both in colleges with a foreign language requirement as well as in those without one — by emphasizing our role in education for global citizenship and by engaging students in research on “the foundations of knowledge and inquiry ... about culture and society ... [with a recognition] of the importance of historical and cultural context” (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 1998); and (3) focusing not only in the study of literature, but more broadly on the study of our target cultures through the disciplinary prisms of history, sociology, economics, or politics, for example, as described more fully in the recent MLA Ad Hoc Committee on

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Foreign Language Report on Foreign Language Education (2007) and consistent with the five C's of the national standards. Indeed, the success of such efforts will help the foreign language field reposition itself from the margins to the center of the liberal arts education, a position from which we in the foreign language field can collaborate with colleagues in other disciplines, students with a diverse range of interests and purposes, and partners beyond the campus to pursue common goals, both in the short-term and the long-term. Working together on the articulation of foreign language curricula and expected outcomes statements will help our programs overcome the challenges posed by administrators who may be unsympathetic to our field and by budgetary constraints that seem tighter with each year.

## Notes

1. This essay is based on a presentation delivered at Boston University in February 2008.
2. This US Department of State uses a classification system consisting of three groups, according to J. Bernhardt of the State Department (personal communication, January 5, 2010). In this system, some languages in DLI Category 2 are shifted into a State Department system group called "world languages" together with the Romance languages of DLI Category 1, while others are classified with the DLI Category 3 languages as "hard languages" (including the Slavic languages, Turkic languages, Hebrew, and many languages of South Asia). The DLI Category 4 languages are classified in the State Department system as "superhard" (Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean). For more information, see Jackson and Kaplan (2001) and the US Government Accountability Office Report to the Chairman of the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (2006).
3. This matter is very different for heritage learners, who come to our curricula typically with greater proficiency in speaking and listening than in reading and writing, especially for the non-alphabetic languages.

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