Global Trends in Language Learning in the 21st Century

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We specialize in educational management and leadership with a particular focus on language and literacy.

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Table of Contents

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Executive Summary

This report is intended to stimulate discussion, provoke thought and generate reflective responses among its readers. Today's language classroom is vastly different from that of the mid- to late 20th century. The report offers a meta-analysis of recent research which provided the means to identify current and emerging trends in the field. Informed by this research, some identified trends that are shaping the 21st century language classroom are:

What's out
- Vague, hollow promises that can't be proven.
- Saying that learning languages is easy.
- Authoritative teacher attitudes.
- Complaining about cutbacks and lack of funding.
- Language labs.

What's in

- Clear, provable demonstrations of learning.
- Frameworks, benchmarks and other asset-based approaches to assessment.
- Individualized, customizable, learner-centred approaches.
- Proving the value of language learning through stories and speech.
- Using technology for language learning.
- Linking language learning to leadership skills.
- Showing funders the impact their investment has on our students, our communities and our world.

In short, the focus in language education in the twenty-first century is no longer on grammar, memorization and learning from rote, but rather using language and cultural knowledge as a means to communicate and connect to others around the globe. Geographical and physical boundaries are being transcended by technology as students learn to reach out to the world around them, using their language and cultural skills to facilitate the connections they are eager to make.

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Introduction

The field of language education is changing at an ever-increasing rate. Traditional notions of education are giving way to newer, more innovative ways of thinking about how we learn, teach and acquire knowledge.

This research report has been prepared to help educational leaders and teachers understand current trends in language education. This includes, but is not limited to:

- English as a Second or Other Language (ESL / ESOL)
- Second and Other Languages in general (SL)
- Literacy and language arts

This work is by no means exhaustive. It is, rather, a meta-analysis of the trends that can be identified based on current research. Its intention is to stimulate discussion, provoke thought and generate reflective responses. It is worth stating that one assumption underpinning this research is that students, and their needs, hopes and aspirations must be kept at the heart of language learning and education.

Readers are encouraged to share this report with colleagues, use it as pre-reading material for professional development sessions and staff meetings. As educational leadership guru, Michael Fullan, points out, "Leaders learning from each other raises the bar for all."

Since much learning takes place through conversations (Siegrist, 2000), school leaders and teachers are urged use this report as a "think piece" to inspire dialogue with other educators and those with a keen interest in the future of language learning.

What's out?

Vague, hollow promises that can't be proven.

Today's tech-savvy students have a world of resources and information at their finger tips. They balk at vague promises that language learning will get them better jobs. Today's job market requires more than a knowledge of another language. In the twenty-first century, a comprehensive essential skill set is needed for employment. This includes competence in areas beyond languages such as:

- numeracy
- thinking skills
- computer use
- the ability to work well with others

(Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, n.d.)

Today's young people understand that lifelong learning is going to be the norm for them. The idea that learning a second language is a ticket to a higher-level job or an international position is an outdated myth. Today knowledge of another language is *one* of a number of skills which may help an individual acquire meaningful employment, not a guarantee to a better job or a career advancement.

Saying that learning languages is easy.

Twenty-first century students are tech-savvy, worldly and quick to shrug off what cannot be proven. Today's students see right through false claims that learning a language is easy. The notion that one can play an audio program while drifting off to sleep and wake up fluent, an idea that once seemed seductively easily, is now dismissed as a myth.

There are ways to make learning languages fun or more enjoyable, but that does not mitigate the need for continuous and dedicated practice.

Remember the "10,000 hours to become an expert" rule, brought alive by Malcolm Gladwell in his book, *Outliers*. In the book Gladwell explains the research behind the notion that true expertise is achieved after an individual has invested 10,000 hours in learning or practicing a skill. This may be a sport, a musical instrument or the study of something. If we consider fluency to be the same as being an "expert" in speaking a language, then a learner may well invest 10,000 hours in their language studies to attain fluency. People will shake their heads when they hear that. No one wants to believe it really requires that much work.

The challenges of learning another language are immense. Yet millions have achieved some degree of fluency in at least one other language. Those who achieve true fluency do so because they put in dedicated, consistent effort over a long period of time. Claiming otherwise is tantamount to fraud.

Authoritative teacher attitudes.

In 1971 a scholar by the name of Robert Nisbet claimed that "the man of knowledge and his pursuits were sacred". Much has changed in years since professor Nisbet wrote those words. While teachers are still regarded as knowledgeable, they are no longer revered as sacred. While some may lament, and even resist this notion, it is safe to say that teachers no longer enjoy the "aura of the sacred", as Nisbet calls it.

In today's world young people are very aware that sometimes they know more than many of the "over-30s", at least when it comes to technology. Adults regularly turn to young people for help and coaching on matters of hardware, software, the Internet and other topics related to technology. Youth of the twenty-first century understand that they are sometimes the authority on concepts and skills that some adults struggle to grasp.

That is why old, traditional, hierarchical and patriarchal attitudes are giving way to more collaborative approaches. Old, authoritative, "teacher-centred" or "expert-centred" approaches to teaching are as out as black and white televisions.

Complaining about cutbacks and lack of funding.

Teacher burnout is a sad phenomenon that is affecting the teaching profession in a variety of ways. Educational leaders must endeavour to improve the conditions under which teachers work, strive to retain excellent teachers and continually seek ways to celebrate and appreciate them. Tremendous cutbacks have affected education in the last 25 years. Today's students do not remember a time before those cutbacks. They do, however, remain hungry for motivation, inspiration and guidance.

Students do not care that their teachers have a big pile of corrections on their desk. Nor do they care that their teachers are overworked and underpaid, or that language programs are the underdog of the institution. Complaining about it makes teachers, that is to say those who are charged with the professional responsibility to be their mentors, look stuffy and jaded. Whiners do not inspire others or mobilize them to act. Leading by example is, more than ever, the job of a teacher in the twenty first century.

Language labs.

Language labs went out with the 20th century. They came into existence in the late 1940s and early 1950s when modern foreign language programs were starting to develop as a discipline in secondary schools and universities. Prior to that classical languages such as Latin and Greek were favoured over modern languages. With the advent of modern language programs, the concept of the language lab was born. Audio labs were constructed, students were corralled into the lab together at an appointed time and they collectively followed a prescribed audio program.

This followed the behavourist model of language teaching. The purpose of language labs was for students to gain auditory exposure to the language they were studying. This was considered a significant innovation in the mid-twentieth century, as it offered students the opportunity to hear the language they were studying in the voice of a native speaker. At that time, students had far fewer opportunities to travel. There was no such thing as the Internet. There was no foreign television programming. And phone calls to family members who were living abroad were horrendously expensive.

That has all changed. In today's world of digital everything, audio exposure to foreign languages is readily available at little to no cost. Satellite radio, Internet radio and podcasts are all available. Even as far back as the 1980s, visionary scholars began to see that one day, language labs would become extinct (Chen, 1996; Froehlich, 1982). They were right. In the twenty-first century, constructing audio language labs is not a wise use of a school's limited money, time and other resources.

What's in?

Clear, provable demonstrations learning.

If vague promises from "authorities" are out, then irrefutable evidence from learners themselves is most definitely in. We are not talking about general-knowledge building here. We are talking about clear demonstrations of the impact language learning has on students.

Projects that challenge students to reflect and ask how they themselves have grown and changed in positive ways are definitely in. Sharing the results of those projects in public ways that demonstrate student learning through showcases, school days, and presentations to parents and community members are also up.

The use of student portfolios is increasing in education in general (Grace, 1992; North Carolina Regional Educational Laboratory, n.d.). When it comes to demonstrations of learning, student portfolios are gaining popularity at a rapid pace. They are collaborative efforts between a student and a teacher that provide clear demonstrations of a student's progress and achievements. Students are guided by their teachers to develop their own portfolios over time. Student portfolios contain demonstrations of their knowledge and authentic language use.

Written work is included. Digital and multimedia projects offer evidence of their oral and listening competencies. More and more, electronic portfolios are being used. The beauty of the student portfolio is that the student owns it, not the teacher. There is a trend in language education overall to incorporate student self-monitoring and self-assessment (Rea-Dickins, 2001). Students carry their portfolios forward from grade to grade, taking responsibility for their learning as they go. Portfolios are an excellent tool to teach learners how to self-montior and evaluate, as well as providing them with provable demonstrations of their learning.

Frameworks, benchmarks and other asset-based approaches to assessment.

A student portfolio demonstrates success in tangible ways, and also provides a means to assess students' learning using an asset-based approach. Asset-based assessment is replacing traditional, deficit-based models of evaluation.

Traditional ways of assessing language acquisition are inadequate in today's world (Pappamihiel & Walser, 2009). Today language acquisition is seen as a complex, nonlinear and communicative endeavour. Traditional multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank (also called "cloze") activities and tests, which are easy to grade do not reflect the complexity that is involved in learning a language. Over the past 20 years, there has been a worldwide movement towards the development and implementation of benchmark systems and frameworks that take an asset-based approach to language assessment.

One example of a successful national benchmarking system is the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) for Canada's two official languages, English and French. On a larger scale in Europe, over 40 countries have adopted the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, developed by the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2001). Researchers and practitioners in other countries are closely following how the European framework is being implemented and used (Canadian Asscociation of Second Language Teachers (CASLT/ACPLS), n.d.; Eaton, 2010; Rehorick & Lafargue, 2005). It is not impossible that one day the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages may evolve into a common global framework.

What these systems have in common is an asset-based approach to evaluating learning. Traditional models of testing revealed "gaps" in students' knowledge. There was an underlying expectation that if only these gaps could be filled with the appropriate knowledge that students' learning would be complete. This is an outdated approach. Educational leaders of the new millennium are asking questions such as, "What *can* my students do?" and "How do we help them grow from where they are now?"

For language teachers this means not focussing on verbs and vocabulary lists. It means recognizing students' abilities to understand, use and produce language in a variety of forms, for a variety of purposes. Asset-based approaches using benchmarks and frameworks are the new trend in language learning evaluation and assessment.

Individualized, customizable, learner-centred approaches.

If teacher-centric instruction is out, then student-centred approaches are definitely in, as is recognizing the need for learner autonomy and cooperative learning (Jacobs & Farrell, 2001). In the twenty-first century, individualized instruction is becoming the norm . As educators and schools recognize and celebrate students' demonstrations of knowledge in clear and tangible ways, so too are we celebrating students' individual talents, aptitudes and skills.

Not only is learning becoming more student centred, but also student participation in the development of outcomes for learning is on the rise (Pauk, 2007). While this may be unsettling for teachers and administrators who are used to exercising their authority to determine student outcomes, it is likely that the trend towards learner-centred approaches and student participation in the development of outcomes will continue.

Proving the value of language learning through stories and speech.

Public speaking and presentation skills are enjoying new levels of prestige in the Obama era. For the first time in decades, there is a U.S. President who is wooing young people with his power to communicate verbally. This is having an impact not only in the United States, but across the globe. There is an increasing focus on the clear verbal articulation of ideas. This is being reflected in the field of languages, as there is an ever-increasing focus on articulate communication. Second language speech contests, debates, poetry readings, and story telling are particularly trendy.

Using technology for language learning.

Consider the idea of a student portfolio mentioned earlier. Now consider that same project done not with a pen and paper, saved and presented in a cardboard portfolio, but instead done entirely using technology. This is what learning in the twenty-first century is all about. Demonstrations of work through portfolios, student-made videos, student blogs, Wikis and podcasts, just to name a few. All of it is in. This is not about using technology for the sake of using technology. This is about using technology to demonstrate students' learning in order to show how they themselves reflect upon the impact language learning has had on them. And then sharing it with others through technology that they use to create their own projects.

In addition to the technologies that *demonstrate* student learning, there are also the technologies that *facilitate* student learning. These technologies may be synchronous (done in real time), such as Skype, Moodle or virtual live classes; or they may be asynchronous (not done in real time) such as podcasts and blogs. It is likely that asynchronous technology will give way to synchronous technologies, as the latter become more sophisticated.

Let's take it one step further: mobile technology for learning is definitely in. It's called "MALL" (mobile assisted language learning) and it is quickly gaining as much buzz today as "CALL" (computer-assisted language learning) created in the 1980s and 90s (Chinnery, 2006; Collins, 2005; Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2007, 2008). It is not impossible that in the future "apps" or some variation of mobile applications, may replace textbooks.

Students are harnessing their creativity to express themselves and demonstrate what they know using technology. The challenge for the twenty-first century teacher will be to find ways to allow them to do that. In today's world, students are the creators, not simply consumers, of technology and technology-produced art and projects.

Linking language learning to leadership skills.

Students today want to learn a language not only to communicate, but also as a means to find contacts, meet people and establish partnerships (Soontiens, 2004). Such activities can only be *facilitated* by learning other languages, but leadership and interpersonal skills are also necessary to make connections and develop lasting partnerships. There is a trend towards learning other languages as a means not only to become self-empowered, but also to empower others. Students are choosing to learn another language in order to go to a country where they can make a difference, for however short a time. Housing projects. Clean water projects. Health-related projects. Projects that help children and families in the developing world. These are more common place today than they have ever been. Learning a language in order to reach out to others and make a difference in the world is in.

Showing funders the impact their investment has on our students, our communities and our world.

There is a shift occurring when it comes to working with funders, and in particular, the government. Today savvy educators and program directors are demonstrating how funding makes a difference, rather than simply asking for more. Demonstrating the impact that funding makes is a less antagonistic, more positive approach. It is a growing trend in the non-profit and voluntary sectors (National Council for Volunary Organizations, n.d.) and is also emerging as a trend in education.

The Movement for Canadian Literacy (2009) asserts that literacy and language organizations are are "moving away from the adversarial, activist approaches of the past, to take increased responsibility for building stronger, more positive communication and working relationships with government" (p.12). The new trend is that after clearly demonstrating the positive impact funders have made on students and programs, language leaders say, "See the impact your contribution has made? Thank you. Thank you for investing in our students and our future. Their future. Now let's see what can accomplish with your continued support..." Seeing government and funders as partners and "investors in the future" is a trend that is likely to continue.

Conclusions

The world is changing at a rapid pace. How we learn is changing. How we teach and assess learning is also changing. Old, authoritarian models are giving way to gentler, more collaborative models. Students are as hungry as they ever were to be guided, coached and mentored. Their curiosity about the world around them continues to be piqued. The difference now is that they have that world at their fingertips. They are experiencing the world through technology in a way that their parents and teachers never did.

Today's language classroom is vastly different from that of the mid- to late twentieth century. The focus is no longer on grammar, memorization and learning from rote, but rather using language and cultural knowledge as a means to connect to others around the globe. Geographical and physical boundaries are being transcended by technology as students learn to reach out to the world around them, using their language and cultural skills to facilitate the connections they are eager to make.

There is a case for a reconceptualized field that is more learner-centered, more collaborative and more technologically driven. The trends in language learning are moving us forward in such a way as to empower our students to communicate with others across the globe in real time.

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Sarah Elaine Eaton holds a PhD in Educational Leadership and an M.A. in Spanish from the University of Calgary. Before moving to Calgary she attended Saint Mary's University in her native city of Halifax where she earned a B.A. (Hons) in English.

A Research Associate at the University of Calgary's Language Research Centre, Dr. Eaton has 12 years of experience teaching Spanish to adults and college age students and has taught at both the college and university level. She has also worked as in educational administration in various capacities including English and a Second Language, post-secondary language and educational research.

An experienced public speaker and member of the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers (CAPS), Eaton has presented her work in seven different countries (Canada, the United Stated, Mexico, Honduras, Cuba, Spain and England). These presentations take the form of keynote addresses, scholarly research dissemination, webinars and interactive workshops.

Dr. Eaton's work has been published both in print and on line. Her book, *101 Ways to Promote Your Language Program: a practical guide for language schools* (available on Amazon.com) is now in its second edition. It has ranked among DeMille's Technical Books Top 10 Best sellers, reaching #1 on that Top 10 list on August 25, 2003. Her e-book Want to Change the World? Learn Another Language: Leadership Inspired by Language Learning (2010) demonstrates how the work of significant world leaders has been improved through learning other languages, and how teachers can frame language learning in positive ways for students. The book contains practical classroom activities and examples.

Dr. Eaton has lived in the U.K. and studied in Spain and has travelled throughout North America, the Caribbean, Latin America and Europe. She now resides in Calgary, Canada.

Contact us