

Editorial: Introduction to the special issue on languages other than English: A reality check and a glimmer of hope

The role of languages other than English (LOTEs) in K-16 education is rife with controversy, particularly in Anglophone contexts. In a recent edited volume, Lanvers et al. (2021) tackled this controversy head-on by creating an anthology that not only described the “language learning problems in Anglophone countries in a holistic and universal manner” (p. 8), but also offered “solutions and examples of positive, forward-thinking practice” (p. 8). Certainly, with the rise of Global English, and even more recently, with the sudden proliferation of AI-enhanced communication strategies, languages other than English are being further marginalized. This marginalization often comes in the form of extreme budget cuts and elimination of courses and programs, as is being seen in a variety of Anglophone contexts and is particularly salient in the US context (Kingson, 2023).

As such, now more than ever is the need to bring to the forefront matters related to LOTEs, not only in Anglophone contexts, but also in contexts across the globe. This special issue is designed to do just this, with seven studies that tackle crucial issues related to LOTEs. The first two studies have an explicit focus on LOTEs as related to social justice, the second two studies examine aspects of heritage language and heritage learners, and the final three studies portray three distinct matters that affect language learning in a variety of contexts.

The studies with an explicit focus on social justice involve the topics of study abroad and hiring practices. In the first study, “Promoting equity in study abroad: A focus on first-generation and students of color in the USA,” Tracy-Ventura, Washington, and Mikheeva identified the need to diversify the high-impact practice of university study abroad programs in the US context, as nationwide, there is a lack of first-generation students and students of color who participate

in such programs. This exploratory study surveyed 137 participants to understand opinions, reservations, and preferred characteristics of study abroad programs. Most of the participants recognized the importance of study abroad programs but were unsure how to take part in such programs. Participants were also concerned about the cost of the trips and limitations of not knowing a language other than English. About half of the participants thought they would or might face racism/discrimination abroad, highlighting the need to develop location-appropriate options for students from a variety of backgrounds. Thompson and Asanov in their study “‘Nonnative? Next!’ Native-speakerism in world language job advertisements” explore potentially discriminatory language used in job advertisements targeting the teaching of LOTEs through the examination of 187 job advertisements posted on the Modern Language Association (MLA) website. Specifically, the study examines the use of discriminatory language in the advertisements associated with native-speakerism, or the concept that language learners should strive to sound like (typically mainstream and monolingual) native speakers of the target language. Background is provided on the concepts of linguicism, essentialism, (neo-)racism, and native-speakerism with employment discrimination, and the results indicate that the majority of LOTE job advertisements indeed use discriminatory language. This study is intended to raise awareness to work towards more inclusive future hiring practices.

The following two studies also include facets of social justice, with a specific focus on aspects of heritage languages and learners. In “Heritage language identity matters: Tracing the trajectory of a Chinese heritage mother and contested Chinese immersion education,” de Costa, Lee, and Her use narrative inquiry to examine heritage language identity development in a Chinese heritage mother, Mandy. The study also draws on Asian critical race theory, a framework that enhances the understanding of equity issues that Asians in US education face. Some of the themes that emerged were those of being a reluctant user of Chinese, recognizing the loss involved in not growing up with Chinese language support, and commitment as a parent to reversing this language loss with her own daughter while facing structural barriers in doing so. The study reveals a need for Chinese dual language bilingual education program administrators to be cognizant of the needs of heritage language families, rather than prioritizing already privileged groups in terms of resource allocation. In the second study focusing on heritage speakers, Serafini and Roca-Ramirez examine the role of critical experiences in the development of self-concept in 20 heritage Spanish speakers in their study “The role of critical experiences, positioning, and agency in the dynamic, emergent construction of heritage speaker selves.” This study identifies the dynamicity of self-development via critical experiences in these Spanish heritage learners, using narrative data from open-ended interviews and peer focus groups.

Themes that emerged include agency when faced with racialization, raciolinguistic ideologies and perceived language competence, and social values in terms of types of bilingualism, among others. Critical experiences of these heritage Spanish speakers lead to the development of selves, both past and future.

The last three studies focus on specific classroom issues: task-based language instruction, the question of modality, and affective variables in language learning. Gurzynski-Weiss, Wray, Kern, and Bernardo in their study "Task-based elementary Spanish in rural Indiana: A practice-based collaboration" outline the onset of a collaborative effort between an exposure-track Spanish language teacher in a rural elementary school and a research team at Indiana University. As discussed in this study, millions of students attend school in rural contexts in the US and these students oftentimes have less-than-robust LOTE programs in their schools. As the benefits of exposure to a second language early in life are many, not having access to robust language programming in rural areas is a matter of equity. Following a needs analysis, the research team developed a task-based Spanish language program in collaboration with the elementary school teacher who offers the Spanish instruction at the school. Details of the first-year collaboration, documented successes with the program, and enthusiasm for implementation in other rural schools are also included. The next study examines the relationship of course modality and students' profiles. Although online language courses have been on the rise for a number of years, by necessity, the number of offerings spiked during the COVID-19 pandemic. Post-pandemic, many students still favor the online modality, primarily because of convenience; however, perceptions of the quality of these online courses depend greatly on students' backgrounds, which is precisely what Wu, Robles-Puente, and Thompson explore in "'Profesora is doing a great job!' or 'Online learning sucks': The relationship between students' profiles and online language learning." With data from 975 students, some of the main findings were more positive perceptions of the online courses with prior experience in online coursework, as well as with those students who were more motivated to learn the language operationalized by having a major or minor in the language. Perhaps surprisingly, freshman had the most positive perceptions of the online language courses with consistent decline as the classification increased. The baseline attitudinal data in this study serve as a starting point for additional inquiry into this topic. The final study by Dewaele and Saito "Are enjoyment, anxiety and attitudes/motivation different in English foreign language classes compared to LOTE classes?" compares 360 learners in Kuwait who are in English classes to those who are in LOTE classes. Some of the main findings indicate that the LOTE learners enjoyed their classes more, having similar levels of anxiety and lower levels of motivation than their counterparts in English classes. The LOTE learners also appreciated

their teachers more and put less effort into their language classes, the latter undoubtedly being an effect of the status of English as a global language.

Each of these studies in this special issue highlights a much-needed research focus in the LOTE sphere, broadly construed. It should not escape notice that as I am finalizing this special issue on LOTES, the Department of World Languages, Literatures and Linguistics that I lead at West Virginia University will be completely eliminated in May 2024, due to decisions made as part of the “academic transformation” process. After a hard-fought battle involving extensive advocacy during Fall 2023, a small number of faculty will keep their jobs and a fraction of the language courses will continue to be offered. Nonetheless, all majors and graduate programs have been eliminated, and the seven faculty (and no graduate teaching assistants) who have been given a stay (for now) is a far cry from the approximately 40 faculty (and 80 graduate teaching assistants) who were in the department when I was hired as Chair in 2018. There have been numerous accounts of the cuts to various units at WVU, but the almost complete elimination of languages at a flagship, land-grant, R1 institution garnered the most media attention because of the severity of the decision (i.e., Hanlon, 2023). Indeed, as Pettit (2023) reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, WVU's actions could be a harbinger of a dangerous trend in higher education across the nation. The US as a whole is woefully monolingual; one illustrative measure is the 30,000 language positions available in the Department of Defense that cannot be filled or the 15% State Department vacancies in overseas language-designated positions (Altschuler & Wippman, 2022). West Virginia is one of the most monolingual states in the US Thompson (2022), and many high school graduates lack the resources to attend university elsewhere. Thus, without the opportunity to learn about languages and cultures other than English at the state's flagship university, many of those from West Virginia will never have the opportunity to do so, forever limiting their opportunities in an increasingly global world.¹

Now a small glimmer of hope – Spring 2024 is the last semester that the Department of World Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics will exist; nonetheless, there are 1,563 students in total enrolled in our classes this semester, which is 53.4% of the enrollment we had in Spring 2023. Certainly, this is a decrease, but as the language requirement was instantaneously canceled and removed from all student records in Fall 2023, this is 1,563 students who CHOSE to enroll in language and culture classes. Even more would have undoubtedly chosen to do so, were there not course restrictions on some types of state and federal

¹ See my website, amysthompson.com, for copies of the departmental self-study and the appeal documents. It is my hope that these documents will be of use to others in their advocacy efforts for LOTES.

student aid, that is, students are not allowed to take classes that do not fit into a category in their plans of study. With the language requirement removed and many majors having very few elective possibilities, many students are essentially prohibited from taking language classes, despite a desire to do so. I choose to take these numbers as an indication that a large number of students recognize the importance of learning a LOTE for personal and professional opportunities, even if the political structures in place fail to do so.

In sum, it is special issues such as this one that help to raise awareness of issues surrounding LOTEs. To paraphrase a concept from Thompson (2021), we first must recognize that there is a problem before we can work to solve the problem, and the lack of robust LOTE-learning opportunities for students in the US context certainly is a problem. As the studies in this special issue tackle important LOTE trends, such as social justice, heritage languages, and classroom matters, it is my hope that other scholars will continue to highlight the importance of LOTEs both in scholarly work and in public-facing publications.

Amy S. Thompson

West Virginia University, Morgantown, USA
amy.thompson@mail.wvu.edu

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