Foreign Language Education and Personal Competencies: Developing Emotional Wellness in Higher Education Students

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Purpose:

- This presentation intends to highlight an existing, but perhaps not so evident link between positive education perspectives and foreign language education in the context of American higher education.

- We will explore the potential benefits of a reevaluation of learning objectives and practices of foreign language programs through an eudaimonic lens.

- By unleashing the eudaimonic power of foreign language education and other disciplines in the liberal arts and the humanities, we can help students acquire very important skills that will help them flourish personally and professionally in an increasingly uncertain world.

Context: The State of Affairs for Foreign Language Programs

- The Modern Language Association (MLA) has released a report which states that from 2013 to 2016, enrollment in foreign language programs in American higher education institutions has dropped 9.2% (Looney & Lusin, 2018, p. 1). To illustrate the significance of these numbers, it is important to consider that they represent the largest drop in enrollment since the first report was published in 1958. For example, in the case of Spanish and Italian, only “one-third of the programs in Italian (33.2%) and Spanish (36.3%) reported stability or growth” (2018, p. 1).

- Earlier this year, the MLA also reported finding “651 instances in which, in fall 2016, a foreign language that had been offered in fall 2013 at a college was not offered”, with French, Spanish, German and Italian being the most affected languages (Jaschik, 2019, para. 1).

The situation is worsened when influential individuals in the political arena are openly disparaging programs in the liberal arts and social sciences and promoting public policy that directly impacts these disciplines. Examples abound, but here are a few just to illustrate.

- "If I’m going to take money from a citizen to put into education, then I’m going to take that money to create jobs (...) So I want that money to go to degrees where people can get jobs in
this state. *Is it a vital interest of the state to have more anthropologists? I don’t think so.*” -Rick Scott, former Governor of Florida (as cited in "Governor Says Florida Has Enough Anthropologists, Calls for Spending on Job-Producing Fields", Kelderman, 2011)

- "There will be more incentives to electrical engineers than French literature majors. There just will, (. . .) All the people in the world that want to study French literature can do so, they are just not going to be subsidized by the taxpayer." - Matt Bevin, Governor of Kentucky (as cited in "Kentucky's Governor vs. French Literature", Jaschik, 2016)
What the job market is starting to tell us.

Several studies have appeared in recent years analyzing the job market, trying to figure out what are some of the most important skills employers want to see in their future employees. Very recently, the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), through its initiative Lead with Languages, conducted a study in which they were able to corroborate that there is a demand for future employers who speak a foreign language:

- "In an era when STEM curricula are overshadowing all other subject areas, foreign language may often be treated as a competing discipline. Instead, it needs to be recognized as a complementary and often interdependent skill that produces the globally competent workforce employers are seeking." (Making Languages Our Business: Addressing Foreign Language Demand Among U.S. Employers, 2019, p. 3)

A closer look to other recent reports, however, tell a much more interesting story. It turns out that there seems to be a strong push for much more than just technical skills. Employers are looking for personal competencies:

- There is some consensus in that humanity is moving towards validating the existence of sensitive, non-prejudiced and supportive human beings, that work for the well-being of all instead of a few, where skills to express feelings, solve conflicts, enjoy simple things and develop kindness over other values" (Sordo, 2017).
This observation is corroborated by reports like *Robot-Ready: Human+ Skills For The Future of Work* by the Strada Institute For The Future of Work, which states that "human skills are in high demand across many industries and include skills such as leadership, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, communication, emotional intelligence, judgment, ethics, and cognitive flexibility." (Weise, Hanson, Sentz, & Saleh, 2019, p. 7).

Voices in the IT arena are also openly making the case for the need of a much more human set of skills. Ravi Kumar, CEO of Infosys, recently expressed this in an op-ed for CNBC:

- "While digital skills like coding and data science are important, it's the soft skills — a strong work ethic; self-motivation; social, emotional and leadership skills; and holistic skills (like problem-finding) that are truly the key components for success in the modern economy. By investing in liberal arts graduates, we gain people with human-centered skills who can approach problems in entirely new ways, contributing to out-of-the-box thinking in a digital age." (Kumar, 2019)

Evidently, there is a heightened focus on the development of personal competencies in an era of unprecedented technological advances that constantly transform the way we live, work and interact. Andrés Oppenheimer, journalist and author specialized in technology and innovation, (2019) validates this assertion when expressing that:

- It is becoming clear as AI becomes more present in our lives, it will have a profound effect on the opportunities and challenges students will have as they enter the workforce. Jobs that involve routines and the storage and processing of information will probably suffer, while academic skills like creativity, originality, and social and emotional intelligence- which should also be taught at colleges and universities- will be key to the jobs of the future (p. 16).

3 - From the article The Workforce Is Calling, Higher Education, Will You Answer? by Heather McGowan (Forbes Magazine, 2019, September 10)

Given that a majority of colleges and universities the US have at least two semesters of a foreign language as part of the General Education requirements, they could be optimal spaces for students to work on personal competencies.
Foreign language courses could be a central part in an effort to integrate positive education approaches into the college experience, providing students with human-centered skills that help improve their quality of life and make them more attractive to employers.

It can be argued that disciplines in the liberal arts and humanities are eudaimonic in nature. For instance, the ability of these educational areas to instill values and ideas that lead to human flourishing need to be embraced and reinforced by the academic programs that constitute them:

- "The subject matter of the humanities often explores the understanding and cultivation of those factors that make life worth living, and this points to the eudaimonic value of the humanities, their value for living life well. (. . .) The eudaimonic value of the humanities, however, although underdeveloped and frequently forgotten, is no less important, and its advancement is one of the most pressing prerequisites for well-being in higher education." (Pawelski, 2016, p. 208)

Foreign Languages and Personal Competencies

- From a sociocultural theory perspective, "language learning is a socially mediated process and language is a cultural artifact that mediates social and psychological activities" and that "all learning or development takes place as people participate in culturally formed settings" (VanPatten & Benati, 2015, p. 82). For instance, language learning is an activity that involves both an internal and individual cognitive process and an external, sociocultural and collective process.
  - In recognition of this essential characteristic, the American Council of the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has develop their "World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages", also known as the 5 Cs, as the pillars that should guide foreign language instruction: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons & Communities.
  - The standards indicate that the ideal learner would engage in interaction and meaning negotiation with a diverse group of people, reflecting on the languages and cultures of others and one’s own, connecting perspectives from the target language and cultures and different intellectual pursuits, and in forming new communities both inside and outside their educational setting.

Krashen (1992) has established that "a variety of affective variables relate to success in second language acquisition", placing them in the following three categories: motivation, self-confidence and anxiety" (p. 31)

The ideal foreign language learning experience is both collective and self-determined. We want to enhance their intrinsic motivation, or at least promote identified or integrated regulatory processes that enhance their extrinsic motivation and consequently contribute to “an ongoing sense of integrity and well-being, or 'eudaimonia’” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, pp. 70, 72).
Ryff (2016) identifies the six “Theory-Guided Dimensions of Well-Being” as follows: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery and autonomy (p. 39). These skills greatly match the ones identified before as essential for the emerging employment landscape, and the ones students can acquire when studying a foreign language.

- Foreign language education can foster:
  - **self-acceptance** through discovery and use of vocabulary that helps enhance emotional intelligence and an appreciative look at the self.
  - **positive relationships** with others, along with a sense of environmental mastery by encouraging students to establish connections with the target community and to collaborate in project-based learning experiences.
  - Connections with student's purpose in life for a personalized and autonomous learning experience that encourages productive interdisciplinary thinking and personal growth.

- Giving the foreign language learning experience a positive framework can help students acquire what Braskamp (2017) refers to as “sense of self”:
  - a process of **self-authorship** based on discovering “what they like to invest their time, talents and treasures” (p. 23). Students start authoring their own lives as they discover their personal goals, derive meaning from finding their sense of purpose and “discover, develop and apply their strengths so that they can reach their potential in their personal lives and in their careers” (Braskamp, 2017, pp. 25-26).

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Foreign language education can do great good by helping students increase their emotional intelligence, through **naming, identifying and describing feelings and emotions in the target language**.

- Part of an eudaimonic curriculum or approach in foreign language education in higher education could include the exploration of emotions through the use of a wide variety of words to properly
describe them and, gradually, provide them with opportunities for reflection and development of self-regulation skills using the target language. The benefits for the emotional well-being of students could be substantial, because “if we can learn to identify, express, and harness our feelings, even the most challenging ones, we can use those emotions to help us create positive, satisfying lives” (Brackett, 2019, p. 11).

Perspectives from a positive educational approach can inform and inspire the process of turning foreign language education into eudaimonic educational spaces for the development of personal competencies without diminish the goal of helping students acquire oral, written, aural and verbal proficiency in a second language.

Examples of an Eudaimonic Approach in Foreign Language Education: How does it look?

- Activity for intermediate level students
- SLA Learning Objective: Narration in the past tense in the target language/ Emotional intelligence framework (Brackett)/ Appreciative Inquiry
  - Step 1: Think about a positive event or experience in your life in the past year, and answer the following questions:
    - Was it a pleasant or unpleasant experience? What adjectives would you use to describe its level of pleasantness? Think of at least four.
    - How energized did it make you feel?
    - If you could label it with one word that could explain how you felt to others, what would it be?
    - What do you think caused you to feel or to experience it that way?
Looking forward, what are some ways in which you can help foster more experiences like this in the future?

- Step 2: Choose a classmate, and each one of you will ask each other these questions and carefully listen to your responses.
- Step 3: Each student will share the two most important lessons they learned from this activity (about themselves and about their classmate).

In this example, we see integration of the "language of emotions" into the description of emotional and mental states through an appreciative inquiry model.

- The idea is to expand the number of adjectives of emotions students use in the target language and to encourage exploration their feelings. Students are encouraged to share stories, create positive bonds with others and to engage in an exercise about self-acceptance and personal growth in an autonomous way in the target language.
- Brackett's "RULER skills": Recognize, Understand, Label, Express and Regulate our emotions (2019, p. 18-19)

Let's imagine this other scenario, this one for advanced level students:

- Students are paired and then asked to think about their own professional goals, and how they relate to addressing a particular problem in their community. Based on their perspectives and areas of expertise, they prepare an interview to a member of a community organization in order to learn about current efforts to tackle that problem. With the information gathered, they will create promotional material in the target language to inform that community about the problem. The material should be aimed to increase awareness, offer tips about what common citizens can do to help and point to local resources to learn more and get help.
  - (Project-based learning, autonomy, service learning, purpose)

Conclusion: The Future — Teaching languages and well-being... seamlessly!

- The preceding analysis of positive and foreign language education has attempted to establish strong links between them that should be explored in depth and researched on.
- The development and adoption of an eudaimonic approach to foreign language instruction could be the source of an uplifting academic experience, but also a space to develop personal competencies that will help students blossom personally and professionally.

Seldon (2018) indicates that "sophisticated voice recognition translation machines are calling into question the need for the teaching of languages. (…) Languages teaching must and will certainly continue, but AI will take away some of its justification. Translation machines though, however word perfect, will never fully comprehend cultural and psychological factors. Indeed, the need for language teaching could grow." (2018)

- An eudaimonic approach to a foreign languages education could be the answer:
  - Approach their own selves and others from an appreciative perspective
- Build meaningful relationships among themselves and with members of the target language community
- Develop their emotional intelligence skills
- Infuse their academic and professional goals with a community-oriented perspective, with a clearer understanding of possible roles and contributions they can make
- Acquire a sense of autonomy over the application of what they learn

References


