Coda – opportunities and challenges in language learning and professionalization in higher education: the road ahead

Béatrice Dupuy, Muriel Grosbois

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1.   Introduction

In considering theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical perspectives for preparing language learners and teachers in/for the 21st century, the preceding chapters have sought to highlight how research findings could/should inform curriculum, instruction, and professional development in higher education so as to promote language learning and sustain its link to professionalization in today's and tomorrow's society. Language learning and professionalization have been explored here through researches focusing on: university students who need to learn to communicate in one or more foreign languages to both interact as global citizens and increase their chances of employability; professionals who, on their lifelong learning journey, study foreign languages to enrich or develop (new) skills for a variety of reasons, including the need to meet evolving work requirements and adapt to an ever changing society; and (pre-service) language teachers who need to learn how best to meet the needs of learners. In this brief coda, we synthesize the major points from the chapters included in this book and highlight the opportunities that exist and the challenges that must be addressed if we want the opportunities not to remain just that.

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2.   Expanding understandings of communication

For over two decades, scholars have recognized and theorized the multilingual and multimodal communication landscapes in which we live and work, and the connectedness of language and culture. Already in 1996, The New London Group was arguing that the multiplicity of texts resulting from increased cultural and linguistic diversity but also increased diversity in modes of meaning-making in the world called for a broader understanding of literacy. Since then, society has changed even more: it is much more digital and the forces of globalization are different. The nature of diversity is no longer understood as it was in the mid-1990's. Enabled by digital media, people from all over the world now come together for a variety of purposes both social and professional and interact in new ways.

Communication can no longer be considered as anchored in the linguistic dimension only, but rather crosses different modes that promote multiliteracies (see Betül Czerkawski and Margherita Berti, Chapter 1). Audio, visual, gestural, and spatial modes of communication are not only integrated within, but often supplant, traditional spoken and written linguistic ones as modes of meaning-making in texts. In this respect, Elyse Petit (Chapter 5) stresses the necessity to go beyond just language by illustrating how in communication, multiple modes co-operate in the creation of meanings, including but not limited to the linguistic mode. Camille Debras (Chapter 7) also insists on the role played by multimodality in communication: focusing on the multimodal, interactional, and intercultural aspects of communicative competence that are key elements of international professional life in the 21st century, she emphasizes the crucial communicative functions of gesture during exolingual interactions. Elsa Chachkine (Chapter 8) explores communication with technology through a telecollaborative project that goes beyond the classroom walls and gives French apprentice-engineers the opportunity to communicate multimodally with their Russian partners. In the process, the French students become familiarized with the Russian language and culture prior to their mobility period, while developing their autonomy as learners, a skill also valuable for their lifelong learning journey.

The expanding understandings of communication illustrated in the book call for a fundamental transformation of foreign language curricula and require a major paradigm shift if the objective of higher education is to foster effective communication to respond to the demands of and changes in the world of work and beyond.

3. Transforming the curriculum

There is a broad consensus that lifelong learning opportunities are needed for professionals across all disciplinary areas, including languages and cultures, and for people at all stages of their careers. The resulting implication is that learner-centered programs, flexible learning paths, and assessment and recognition of prior learning are required for language learning. Faced with this imperative, institutions of higher education need to be agile and committed enough to meet this challenge.

Words such as active, applied, and evidence-based are currently framing conversations related to transforming curricula, pedagogies, and spaces (physical or virtual, at home or abroad) in which learning takes place and knowledge is developed (Brooks, 2010). In this book, Betül Czerkawski and Margherita Berti (Chapter 1) underscore the necessity to transform current FL curricula so they can foster 21st century skills and lifelong learning. They make the case for using instructional design guidelines to create meaningful learning experiences that meet people's communication needs in environments in constant evolution. Aude Labetoulle (Chapter 3) explains how complex it can be to design an English curriculum that is relevant to students' future professional needs in French universities when their disciplines are varied. She proposed a diversified and flexible syllabus organized around meaningful tasks for students. Individual needs were taken into consideration and students had the opportunity to select tasks based on needs and a personal project activity was introduced. The objective was to individualize the degree of professionalization by allowing students to tailor the course to their specific needs. The course also put emphasis on learner autonomy when completing the tasks. Naouel Zoghlami (Chapter 2)

suggests that needs analysis could provide the necessary data to inform the design of a curriculum and pedagogical tasks that are responsive to learners' needs in a French public institution dedicated to lifelong learning.

The challenge inherent to instructional design is strengthened by the fact that in today's society, circumstances change rapidly (social, economic…) and learners are diverse; as The Douglas Fir Group (2016) reminds us, "[i]ncreasingly numerous and more diverse populations of adults and youth become multilingual and transcultural later in life, either by elective choice or by forced circumstances, or for a mixture of reasons" (p. 19). Learners also tend to make the most of formal as well as non-formal and informal learning opportunities on their lifelong learning journeys. As noted by Toffoli (2020) learners may "engage in totally independent journeys, in entirely informal contexts and media, while others choose trajectories marked by institutional constraints, and still others pursue journeys somewhere between these two extremes" (p.186). Furthermore, their trajectories are likely to evolve over time on an individual basis.

The diversity of learning paths sustains the relevance of the shift from instructional design to learning design, a distinction established in the literature to underscore the importance of learner-centeredness in the design process. This change of focus actually goes as far as to raise the question of adult learners as course designers, a perspective which gives learners great freedom of choice. Learning centered on the learner's needs does not necessarily follow a previously established path and is partly shaped by 'organizing circumstances' (Spear & Mocker, 1984) as suggested by Narcy-Combes (2018). This change of perspective, with a more or less loosely structured framework, calls for a shift in language teacher education.

4.   Rethinking the role and preparation of language teachers

The need to both expand current understandings of communication and reconsider the very principles of instructional design underscores the urgency

to rethink the education and professional development of language teachers. Betül Czerkawski and Margherita Berti (Chapter 1) emphasize the importance for teachers to go beyond a curriculum that often privileges linguistic aspects of language rather than meaning and explore the complementarity that exists between more or less formal settings to create learning opportunities that align with students' needs. Tara Hashemi (Chapter 4) highlights the need to provide pre-service language teachers with relevant professional development opportunities so that they understand the complex notions that undergird the multiliteracies framework and multiliteracies pedagogy and are better able to facilitate the meaning-making process as students read and produce multimodal texts. When implemented, a multiliteracies-oriented approach may help overcome the challenges that language and culture might bring, as illustrated by Elyse Petit (Chapter 5). This line of research aligns well with the call for a broader understanding of literacy and literacy teaching to better support learners as they design their social and professional futures (The New London Group, 1996). Pauline Beaupoil-Hourdel (Chapter 6) also argues that the multimodal interactions that take place in the home during literacy events should inform the professional development of kindergarten and primary school teachers. Blurring the frontiers between learning environments, she invites (pre-service) teachers to make the most of the home/school link with respect to new multimodal perspectives on fostering communicative competence.

Given the evolving nature and complexity of communication and learning environments as well as the diversity of learners and the conception of language teachers as facilitators of learning, we consider that the way forward is for language researchers-teachers and learners to be partners in shaping the curriculum so it is best suited to meet the needs of professionals in the 21st century.

What started as a two-day symposium co-organized by the Cnam and the University of Arizona in January 2019 triggered our reflection on language learning and professionalization and laid the groundwork for this volume. We hope that the cases under study in this book will lead the profession to reflect on language learning and professionalization in higher education with a view

of how to best prepare learners and teachers in/for the 21st century, especially at a time when distance education, video conferencing, and virtual mobility are expected to develop exponentially.

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