

Developing transdisciplinary language courses and collaborations using higher education's institutional analytics

Kate Shea

The University of Arizona

Abstract

Within higher education, there is campus-wide discourse increasingly calling for preparing graduates for a globalized world, internationalizing the curriculum, and building international partnerships. Yet, some of the departments - notably language programs - are absent in the discussion regarding solutions and allocated funds (Tardy, 2015; Warner, 2011). Despite this disconnect, there remains a critical need for the transcultural competencies, multilingual abilities, and a globalized perspective that are frequently incorporated into language learning courses in higher education. As one way of addressing this, there is a continued call for transdisciplinary approaches and collaboration in SLA research (Douglas Fir Group, 2016) and transdisciplinary course offerings (Modern Language Association, 2007). These suggestions coincide with continued conversations and underlying pressing concerns among language programs in HEIs that they increase or maintain student enrollment to persist in an increasingly market-oriented approach to education. This paper seeks to address these looming issues by highlighting data analytics use from other higher education fields (e.g., student success and retention efforts) into different programmatic and transdisciplinary curricular models as a solution to the challenge of offering cross-disciplinary language courses that increase student enrollment.

Keywords: transdisciplinary language courses, language program administration, higher education enrollment, institutional analytics

Introduction

Within U.S. higher education, there is campus-wide discourse increasingly calling for preparing graduates for a globalized world, internationalizing the curriculum, and building international partnerships. Yet, some of the departments - notably language programs - are absent in the discussion regarding solutions and allocated funds (Tardy, 2015; Warner, 2011). There is contrasting discourse surrounding language programs: from a neoliberal commodification of language learning for economic value and utilitarian purpose and the contrasting discussion of a modern, multilingual, multicultural world, where learners will have dynamic, evolving identities as a result of their language study (e.g., NLG, 1997; Kellner & Share, 2007). Despite these contrasting perspectives, there remains a critical need for the transcultural competencies, multilingual abilities, and a globalized perspective that are frequently incorporated into language learning courses in higher education. As one way of addressing this, there are persisting calls for transdisciplinary approaches and collaboration in SLA research (Douglas Fir Group, 2016) and developing transdisciplinary course offerings (Modern Language Association, 2007).

The profession's longstanding calls for promoting transdisciplinary collaborations both in research and curricular development coincide with continued conversations and an underlying

pressing concern among language programs in HEIs that they increase or maintain student enrollment to persist in an increasingly market-oriented approach to education. The latter enrollment crisis is also enmeshed in neoliberal discourse that asks humanities departments to validate their existence, compete for students, and commodify the instruction of language (often for national security). However, solely critiquing this discourse (and its effect on student enrollment) ignores some of the larger issues facing students as they decide to pursue language study (namely, the rising cost of attendance and potential return on investment).

Thus, this conceptual paper seeks to address these looming issues by highlighting institutional analytics use from other higher education fields (e.g., student success and retention efforts) that can be used to create different programmatic and transdisciplinary curricular models as a solution to the challenge of offering transdisciplinary language courses that increase student enrollment. As such, this conceptual model also takes the view that language learning courses can be both for a “utilitarian purpose” in support of other academic disciplines as well as the more commonly structured *independent* object of study in a humanistic disciplinary tradition.

Defining Disciplinary

Research is intended to guide, inform, and ideally improve practice, but it also remains bounded by disciplinary ontologies, epistemologies, and frameworks (Young, 2018). In highlighting Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory, its historical origin, and methodological differences, one sees an evolution within SLA towards more sociocultural methodologies and, in turn, communicative teaching methodology (Kramsch, 2016; Larsen-Freeman, 2007; Scarino & Liddicoat, 2016; Thornbury, 2011). However, research trajectories and instructional approaches do not universally change and evolve in a linear fashion. The pedagogical shift towards communicative learning objectives and ACTFL’s proficiency goals led to an environment where “language instruction came to be narrowly regarded as the teaching of tools or skills for effective community” (Sato et al., 2017, p. 54). Alongside this perspective, neoliberal views of language learning for economic value or national security have guided the discourse surrounding language programs. Countering these perspectives, critical and poststructural research approaches in SLA (e.g., Pavlenko, 2002) acknowledge the reality of a modern, multilingual, multicultural world, where learners will have dynamic, evolving identities as a result of their language study and struggle with an unequal world embedded in neoliberal cultural values (e.g., NLG, 1997; Kellner & Share, 2007). As such, there are increased calls for interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinary collaborations in both SLA research and instruction. The terms multidisciplinary, interdisciplinarity, and transdisciplinarity have also been likened to the respective synonyms additive, interactive, and holistic, and can be separately defined in the following ways:

Multidisciplinarity draws on knowledge from different disciplines but stays within their boundaries. Interdisciplinarity analyzes, synthesizes and harmonizes links between disciplines into a coordinated and coherent whole. Transdisciplinarity integrates the natural, social and health sciences in a humanities context, and transcends their traditional boundaries. (Choi & Pak, 2006, p. 351)

While this paper uses each of these terms throughout the paper, they are not intended to be viewed as interchangeable, but rather a recognition that some of the highlighted curricular samples have drawn on disciplinary differences in different ways, at times better reflected by this different

terminology. In cases of ambiguity, I have adopted the terminology used by the scholars in the cited research.

Decades after Firth and Wagner's (1997) call for broadened ontological and epistemological frameworks, the Douglas Fir Group (2016) reiterated the need for transdisciplinary research and "the changing nature of language learning and teaching in a multilingual world" (p. 20). King and Mackey (2016) argue that research must not only draw on different approaches and methodologies, but must also be perspective-taking from these other disciplinary lenses, a process they call "layering". Indeed, just as when research is considered to be interdisciplinary, a course offering with a similar title should acknowledge disciplinary differences as students navigate varying objects of study and methodologies in meaning-making, in order to successfully "layer" the approaches of each respective discipline. One area in which research has heralded change, but in which world language programs within the U.S. have been slow to respond, is this call for cross-disciplinary collaboration and interdisciplinary course offerings. This delay is largely caused by the two-tier structure of language programs built on persisting, varying perspectives of the language learning process (Swaffar, 2014). Also challenging the creation and implementation of cross-disciplinary language courses is the reality that programs are often situated within institutional structures that may silo departments with finance structures that dissuade cross-disciplinary collaboration.

In curriculum development, instructors can also benefit from the collaboration and incorporation of these layered disciplinary perspectives, and it is critical that students also be taught the benefits of interdisciplinary thinking. Language courses offer a natural medium for this instruction as both the object of study and the medium through which one learns and knowledge is gained. Indeed, professional organizations such as the Modern Language Association (MLA) have argued that cross-disciplinary courses are needed to solve the challenge of higher education's call to prepare a globalized student body and address a critical, national need for language learning (MLA, 2007). Despite the discourse that often excludes language programs from institutional goals of internationalizing the curriculum, globalizing the student body and experience, and welcoming international students, language programs are truly best situated to meet these needs (Tardy, 2015; Warner, 2011). Using a series of models along the language-content spectrum and HEIs' use of student data analytics for student success and retention efforts, this paper seeks to argue that language programs' offering and recruitment strategies can change strategically with the assistance of institutional tools and the willingness to adopt flexible curricular innovation.

Language Programs in the U.S. - Context & Challenges

"The two-tiered configuration has outlived its usefulness and needs to evolve" (MLA, 2007)

Challenges to transdisciplinary curricular innovation and student enrollment are largely due to structural issues within the U.S. language program's historical and persistent structure as "two-tiered", a potential devaluation of SLA pedagogical knowledge within that structure, and institutional silos that challenge transdisciplinary collaborations. These structural challenges will be elaborated upon below before offering institutional analytics-backed solutions.

Firstly, the two-tier structure within foreign language programs refers to the common curricular disconnect between first and second-year language courses and the third- and fourth-year culture-focused courses. There is a perception that introductory language courses, seen as stepping-stones to the culture-centric intermediate and advanced course offerings, provide

instruction for routine skills only as opposed to being courses with intellectual rigor and content (Guthrie, 2001; Sato et al., 2017; Swaffar, 2014). This is obviously strongly contested for SLA experts as early language courses still introduce cognitively complex content and intellectual debate alongside language and cultural topics. Yet, there remains a sentiment that the SLA faculty members' association with language learning devalues their research in "departments that consider language study to be but the mere acquisition of skills with no intellectual content" (Kramsch, 2000, p. 320). Surveys conducted of those in the language program director role who oversee these introductory course offerings (Lord, 2015; Schultz, 2005) highlight the myriad of responsibilities that can create an early-career sense of being overburdened and underappreciated in these "two-tiered" departments (Zannirato, 2015). Kramsch (2000) and VanPatten (2015) further highlight how the hiring process for these language program director roles may not always clearly define the required background or training needed for the roles, and thus do not give proper credit to the SLA and pedagogical expertise these faculty members often bring to their roles. In response to the MLA's (2007) report, Bernhardt (2010) highlights that curricular changes called for in the report require research-backed findings and these SLA experts need to be included in the internal departmental decision-making process. Levine (2011) notes that issues of the two-tiered department are improving gradually and that there are many internal departmental efforts to better articulate language and culture content within language programs. Importantly, cross-disciplinary partnerships to introduce language across the curriculum will require the expertise and instructors familiar with these introductory courses, best practices within SLA, and pedagogies such as Content-Based Instruction (CBI) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) that effectively integrate content- and language-focused student learning outcomes.

In a description of their own departmental efforts to build interdisciplinary partnerships, Melin (2014) notes that institutional obstacles related to finances and structures may cause another course outside of the department to be viewed as competition for student enrollment, as opposed to an ideal opportunity for collaboration. However, several of the "interdisciplinary courses" proposed by Melin (2014) as part of the curricular renovation remain text-based and grounded in humanistic inquiry, merely with texts on different topics that could be tied to another discipline, so the question of what it means to be truly interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary is important.

Supporting Melin's (2014) argument that institutional silos challenge true collaboration, Anderson and Lord (2018) administered a survey to language program faculty members. They found that faculty responses "reflect a general awareness of the recommendations from the MLA report and overall acceptance of the need to change; however, change has—and continues to be—slow" (p. 118). Their surveyed statement, which yielded the most disagreement, was "[l]anguage courses in my unit are interdisciplinary and/or are often taught in collaboration with other units" (p. 120). This highlights the continued reluctance and struggles language departments can encounter in building transdisciplinary course offerings. In summation, calls for interdisciplinary course offerings and curricular revision are not new in the language teaching field, and developers continue to encounter challenges during implementation. In conceptualizing the ways in which institutional analytics can assist with course development and enrollment, it is useful to first define institutional analytics, understand the way it has been used in other higher education fields, and finally, consider the language and content curricular spectrum and the potential application of institutional analytics.

Defining Institutional Analytics

EDUCAUSE, a non-profit that encourages IT integration in fields like higher education, defines analytics as: “the use of data, statistical analysis, and explanatory and predictive models to gain insights and act on complex issues” (Bichsel, 2012). While it is most often used for institutional reporting, institutional data’s applications are much more far-reaching. Enrollment management departments have optimized fund allocation to guide who they recruit and admit (Ungerleider, 2013). Across the country, academic advisors have adapted ‘proactive advising practices’ assisted by student information systems to automate prompts to improve student retention (Kyte et al., 2020). These types of proactive practices can include things like sending alerts to students the moment they might register or drop courses, reminding them of degree plans, policies, etc., and are created and administered using institutional analytic reports and tools. These analytic-driven efforts have been shown to improve retention, students’ feelings of connectedness, and overall graduation rates (Kyte et al., 2020). For language programs, institutional analytics can be used for program evaluation, student recruitment, and strategic course development that integrates content and language objectives of interest to students.

Using Institutional Analytics to Survey Students for Program Evaluation

Institutional analytics can be used to better understand students within and outside of foreign language programs. Davis’ (2015) survey of language program assessment practices highlights the various types of data that can be collected; from student demographics (e.g., Ecke & Ganz, 2014), iterative student surveys (e.g., De Fina & Melucci, 2015) to faculty-student exit interviews (e.g., Sempere et. al., 2009). However, language program evaluation tends to survey students who are currently in the program or classrooms. Much more insight can be gleaned from students who never enter the language classroom, but may desire to, and institutional analytics provide venues for identifying and reaching out to these students. For example, students’ transfer credits, AP scores, and proficiency test placements are easily retrievable metrics. Even when a student places a course in their “shopping cart” in advance of enrollment or drops the course prior to it starting, these actions are recorded and retrievable. Predictive analytics could be used to better understand those most likely to enter a language program and students for whom targeted recruitment could help. For example, Wichita State’s admissions decisions are geared towards optimizing fund allocation to those students most likely to be swayed to attend and be retained, and have saved the institution significantly from spending money recruiting students unlikely to attend (Ungerleider, 2013). Many language program directors are likely aware of local high schools with language programs that feed into their institution, but not necessarily the other trends behind students’ enrollment and major selection. Additionally, interviewing highly motivated students who may never enter a language program, as in the case of Diao and Liu (2020), offers valuable insight into the logistical and motivational challenges (i.e., scheduling, modalities, placement testing, etc.) that students encounter that language programs should seek to mitigate. In critique of the 2007 MLA report, Grabe (2010) argues that re-envisioning the curriculum as the MLA encouraged, but failed to address, must acknowledge students’ needs and preferences, saying:

It gives little serious thought to contemporary students in U.S. universities and how they could be encouraged to learn and use foreign languages. However, the future of foreign language study at U.S. universities is not likely to rest with what faculty want, but with what students want, or at least what students are willing to value. There seems to be very

little awareness in the Report that university curricula need to address relevance to student needs first and foremost. (Grabe, 2010, p. 11)

To promote cross-disciplinary course collaboration and promote student registration, student surveys for program evaluation should seek to elicit input on what may prevent current and potential students' continued studies, just as much as what motivates them. Ultimately, data analytics allows departments to make data-driven decisions about investing time and effort in cross-disciplinary partnerships, connecting and serving students, and improving program offerings. The following section describes different types of interdisciplinary course offerings that have successfully been implemented elsewhere and whose implementation and successful student enrollment could be assisted at other institutions through institutional data.

Course Offerings along the Content-Language Spectrum

Lin (2016) presents learning objectives for language and content learning on a continuum, where language can be both viewed as the subject being taught and the medium in which content is learned. Lying at different points along this spectrum are a wealth of offshoots and overlapping terms. These include but are not limited to content-based instruction (CBI), content language integrated learning (CLIL), (foreign) language across the curriculum ((F)LAC) and bilingual education. In many ways, these are comparable models in that they all merge language and content learning objectives. In some cases, the difference in terminology has been argued to be more geographical than pedagogical. For example, within North America, CBI is often used to describe a wide variety of structures from immersive or subversive bilingual education, whereas CLIL largely developed as a term in European education's efforts to promote multilingual instruction (Cenoz, 2015). While similar to CBI, CLIL could be characterized as uniquely different by the frequent collaboration between two instructors - one for content and one for language. Foreign language departments must then consider the extent to which a course will focus on language or content, the venues for transdisciplinary collaboration, and how institutional analytics can support these interdepartmental outreach and student recruitment. In the following four sub-sections, I begin by introducing a model of course development discussed in the literature and explain how data analytics can support the development of similar courses.

Content-Based Instruction

As an example of a CBI collaboration, Sato and colleagues (2017) describe their instruction in two separate courses - a fourth-year Japanese course and an upper-division literature course with the shared theme of "Ethnic minorities in Japan" as "Critical Content-Based Instruction". In this curricular design, both courses were weighted equally in terms of credits and workload, and students could select to enroll in one or both sections. The instructors note that language, content, and critical thinking skills are assessed separately in the development of these CCBI courses. They describe it as critically different in that these additional learning objectives intentionally focus on developing transcultural skills alongside interdisciplinary thinking in two languages. This course was strategically scheduled to allow interested students the ability to register in both courses during their separate time periods. While Sato et al. (2017) offered these courses at a liberal arts college with small class sizes, this type of strategic overlapping of course content could be done at a larger institution with insight into students' schedules and their shared availability. Many institutions offer similarly scheduled courses year over year, and mining this data is made easier with a student information system's historical collected data. It would be easy to deduce that based on a student's

major and class standing, the type of courses that they may still need to take, and the times at which those are likely to occur. Sato et al. (2017) offer one example of how class scheduling information can support course development along the language and content spectrum. Many universities already have extensive data systems built that focus on course scheduling in an effort to boost retention and graduation rates. For example, Arizona State University has used a College Scheduler platform to provide students a sample class schedules that fit their major requirements as well as personal and academic requirements. In adopting this data-driven approach, they argue their graduation rate has improved 20% since implementation (Zinshteyn, 2016).

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

Sullivan (2010) describes a fruitful, cross-departmental collaboration to create a five-year dual-degree whereby students complete an engineering degree and a degree in either French, German, or Spanish. Within this model, general education courses applied a CLIL model with supplemental credits and collaborative co-teaching, whereas the engineering major courses were taught using CBI with a single, bilingual instructor. The partnership to create an International Engineering Program (IEP) was sparked by the arrival of a German engineering department head. But, how might these collaborations be pursued in the absence of a heritage speaker leading the department, as in the case of this partnership? Most commonly, institutional analytics serves as a database of valuable information and this can be leveraged by foreign language departments for crossing institutional silos. A foreign language department without these types of pre-existing connections might consider approaching other academic departments with data on the number of their shared students that entered with “x” transfer credits, declared minors/majors, etc., and with evidence of potential pipeline programs, like study abroad or internship opportunities that may be supported by language skill development. Even without collaboration, this data could yield fruitful interdisciplinary course development. For example, several of the interdisciplinary language courses proposed by Melin (2014) as part of the curricular renovation remained text-based and grounded in humanistic inquiry, but incorporated disciplinary perspective-taking by including texts on different topics that could be tied to another discipline. In collecting this information for partnerships or curricular change, there needs to be a willingness to craft courses and opportunities that span the language-content spectrum to collaboratively meet both academic disciplines’ and students’ needs.

Foreign Language Across the Curriculum

A subset within content-based instruction, or content-language integrated learning, is foreign languages across the curriculum (FLAC) models that feature the content of the exterior discipline, often supplemented in a secondary way by language instruction. For example, an introductory course on Chemistry might offer a one-credit lecture supporting the main section’s academic content, but have this supplemental instruction conducted in Spanish. Notably, these models can vary in the level targeted and the extent to which language and content are weighted in the courses’ learning objectives and assessment (for an overview of several models, see Caldwell, 2001). Due to this variation in linguistic background, topical interest, credit weight, etc., data is an advantageous tool to facilitate decisions on which course would provide an advantageous pairing, and the students to whom the course is advertised and intended. While there is some critique that a “supplemental” role (in terms of credits awarded) downplays the significance of language, it is important to note that there are an increasing number of variable credit courses offered from a variety of departments/disciplines for supplemental instruction, professionalization,

and personal interest. Variable credit courses recognize student preferences and potential scheduling challenges. Gala (2008) specifically cites FLAC success stories that incorporated one credit offerings because the structure was built to satisfy pre-existing freshman seminar requirements. Importantly, these one or two credit courses offered in conjunction with other departments allow for interdisciplinary thinking and may act as a recruitment tool to courses with more language focus or for declaring a major in a language.

Bilingual Education as a Norm

As discussed previously, the two-tier language department generally leads students from “basic language courses” to upper-division courses on humanities subjects taught in the target language. While the development of interdisciplinary course offerings is first being argued for in this paper, institutions also must consider whether the language of instruction in courses across campus can be diversified. My own institution was recently designated a Hispanic-serving institution and is situated in the borderlands region between the U.S. and Mexico, with a rich Spanish-speaking heritage and many L1 Spanish speakers and L2 Spanish learners in the student body. As part of the new HSI designation, several courses are being translated into Spanish with the intention of serving heritage speakers, not L2 learners (Swedlund, 2022). Institutions with similar dominant heritage or secondary languages in the student population should consider a bilingual track education for core courses - math, history, etc.

Bilingual education has a myriad of versions from one-way, two-way, additive, subtractive, etc. Within K-12 systems in the United States, these programs have been greatly hampered by No Child Left Behind’s assessment mandates (Shohamy & Menken, 2015), and indeed the requirement for bilingual or heritage language programs to test in a language in which students are not being taught has a long history of discriminatory practices. Caution then must be made in the construction of a bilingual program at an HEI, as “bilingual education programs can be tools for reinforcing privilege, tools for emancipatory efforts, or tools for celebrating and appreciating cultural diversity. Often, they serve all of these functions simultaneously” (Flores & Baetens Beardsmore, 2015, p. 205). More specifically, by asking the extent to which content or language learning objectives are being covered and the extent to which heritage language or additional language learners’ needs are being addressed, one can determine whether the program serves minority language speakers or majority language students.

Implications and Conclusion

After decades of calls for transdisciplinary research and cross-disciplinary course offerings, one area in which research has heralded change, but in which world language programs within the U.S. have been slow to fully respond, is this call for cross-disciplinary collaboration and interdisciplinary course offerings (Anderson & Lord, 2018). Institutional silos, finance structure, and competition for student enrollment all play a role in this slow change. However, institutional resources like data analytics offer venues for insight into where collaborative partnerships might be best formed. And, importantly, these interdisciplinary course offerings can be a way to combat persistent concerns related to declining student enrollment.

This paper has highlighted the use of data analytics in other HE departments, such as improving funds spent on student recruitment and enrollment (Ungerleider, 2013), proactive advising (Kyte et al., 2020), and student retention (Castle, 2018) and suggested that language programs use institutional analytics for program evaluation, student recruitment, and strategic

course development. These interdepartmental partnerships can creatively use a number of tools, like variable credit courses and targeted class scheduling, to create course offerings along the language-focused and content-focused spectrum. Doing so will serve as an introduction to the value of language study to those who might not otherwise participate in the course, increase departmental understanding of obstacles to study, and ideally will serve to recruit students for continued language study.

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