



Applied Language Learning

Foreword from the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center

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This special issue of *Applied Language Learning* arrives at a pivotal moment for Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture (LREC) across the Department of Defense and the broader language education community. Over the past two decades, LREC has evolved from a collection of complementary capabilities into a fully integrated framework essential to navigating today's complex, dynamic, and culturally mediated operational environments.

The articles in this issue reflect that evolution. Taken together, they demonstrate a clear shift from viewing language proficiency, regional knowledge, and cultural competence as discrete domains toward understanding them as mutually reinforcing dimensions of a single human capability. This integrated perspective underscores a central insight: success in contemporary missions depends not only on what individuals know, but on how they interpret, adapt, and act within unfamiliar sociocultural systems.

A defining theme that emerges throughout this volume is the importance of transformative instruction. Language learning is not conceptualized as the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar alone; it is a developmental process that challenges assumptions, reshapes perspectives, and builds adaptive leaders. Grounded in cultural relativism, effective LREC instruction enables learners to engage meaningfully with difference—cultivating not just proficiency, but empathy, flexibility, and ethical awareness. These qualities are indispensable in environments where influence, communication, and trust may be more decisive than force.

Equally prominent is the role of innovation in pedagogy, particularly through the integration of emerging technologies. Contributions examining generative artificial intelligence illustrate both its promise and its complexity. AI-enabled tools can expand opportunities for personalized learning, simulated interaction, and targeted feedback, offering powerful means to support high levels of proficiency and engagement. At the same time, their effective use depends on thoughtful implementation, informed instructors, and a clear alignment with pedagogical goals. Technology, as this issue emphasizes, is not a substitute for instruction but a force multiplier when grounded in sound educational principles.

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The issue also illuminates enduring challenges within LREC education. Integrating culture-general and culture-specific competencies remains an ongoing tension, as does the difficulty of assessing intercultural development in meaningful ways. Similarly, while regional expertise is widely recognized as essential, it is not sufficient on its own; deep knowledge must be paired with the adaptability required to operate effectively across contexts. These challenges point to the inherent complexity of preparing individuals for real-world intercultural engagement.

Importantly, several studies included here highlight the human dimensions of learning—motivation, autonomy, and resilience. Findings on learner engagement, grit, and the importance of understanding the “why” and the “so what” behind language study reinforce a simple but powerful truth: transformative outcomes depend as much on the learner’s internal drive as on instructional design. Instructors, therefore, play a critical role not only in teaching content, but in fostering purpose and sustaining commitment.

In aggregate, this special issue offers more than a collection of studies; it presents a coherent vision for the future of LREC. It calls for approaches that are integrative rather than fragmented, experiential rather than purely theoretical, and transformative rather than transactional. It affirms that developing linguistically capable, culturally agile, and regionally informed professionals is not merely an educational objective—it is a strategic necessity.

I hope this special issue of *Applied Language Learning* contributes meaningfully to ongoing discussions within the LREC community and beyond. More importantly, I hope it supports instructors, program designers, and leaders in their efforts to prepare learners to communicate effectively, adapt intelligently, and lead responsibly in an increasingly interconnected and complex world.