



Applied Language Learning

Foreword from the U.S. Military Academy, West Point

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This issue of *Applied Language Learning* reflects Charles Taylor's broader understanding of language learning that is captured in his description of the human being as fundamentally a "language animal." The contributions gathered here examine emerging technologies, language aptitude, cross-cultural competence, learner autonomy, and authentic language use. While diverse in method and focus, they share a common concern: how language educators can better prepare learners to navigate contemporary linguistic and cultural environments. The field of Foreign Language education indeed occupies a unique place among academic disciplines in the analysis of human affairs and the cultivation of human beings. I still remember the joy of learning to write my first Chinese character in eighth grade, of course to impress a fellow eighth grader (a girl). Twenty-five years later, that same joy had blossomed into deep socio-linguistic insight as I sat across from a PLA colonel in Beijing while I was serving as a working group lead on the *US-China Army-Army Dialog Mechanism*. Now, as the Head of West Point's Department of English and World Languages, I am involved daily in the profound endeavor of cultivating in Cadets that same joy of foreign language learning in order that they may also reap the benefits of mind and character that will make them, too, better commissioned officers. This transmutation of joy to insight is the guiding ethos of the foreign language teacher toiling in classrooms across the Republic, whether they be the ones in West Point's Washington Hall or at the Presidio of Monterey at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center. I have taught in both classrooms and am certain of this: we rightfully keep the faith that our efforts will prove well spent at other places at other times, when the country will rely on the faculty of attention and nuance of judgment that can be the hallmark of cross socio-linguistic sophistication of the commissioned and non-commissioned officers, the cryptolinguists, the Foreign Area Officers and so many others that we are privileged to call our students.

Several articles in this volume explore the opportunities and challenges presented by generative artificial intelligence. These discussions arrive at a pivotal moment. Artificial intelligence promises unprecedented access to personalized instruction, feedback, and authentic interaction. At the same time, what aspects of the learning, production, and interpretation of language should be delegated to technology, and what aspects remain irreducibly human? Language is not

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merely information exchange. It is *participation in shared forms of life*. The challenge before us is to harness technological innovation without losing sight of the relational, interpretive, and ethical dimensions of language education.

Other contributions to this special issue examine language aptitude and learner success. Such work reminds us that language acquisition is shaped by a complex interplay of cognitive, motivational, and contextual factors. At the same time, these studies challenge simplistic assumptions about talent and achievement. Aptitude matters, but so do persistence, purpose, instructional design, and opportunities for meaningful engagement. The most successful learners are often those who develop not only skill, but also a sustained sense of why language learning matters. That emphasis on purpose is especially evident in discussions of learner autonomy and intercultural reflection. The most enduring language education does not end when a course concludes, or a proficiency test is passed. Rather, it cultivates habits of inquiry that continue throughout a lifetime. Whether our students are Infantry Platoon Leaders, attachés or intelligence analysts, all become capable of asking new questions, seeking unfamiliar perspectives, engaging constructively with cultural complexity and providing better analysis. Particularly noteworthy are the contributions that move beyond narrowly formal representations of language. Studies examining authentic discourse, informal speech, and intercultural engagement remind us that real language use rarely conforms to the tidy boundaries of textbooks. Human communication unfolds within relationships, communities, institutions, and traditions. Effective language instruction must therefore expose learners not only to linguistic structures but also to the realities that give those structures meaning. Understanding communication within its social, cultural, and historical context enables learners not only to interpret the outward manifestations of culture, but also to recognize the values, perspectives, and relationships that influence human behavior across communities and regions.

As someone deeply engaged with Chinese studies and broader regional dynamics, I have witnessed firsthand how language competence shapes understanding. Strategic competition, diplomacy, military cooperation, economic exchange, and cultural interaction all depend upon the ability to comprehend not merely what others say, but how they understand themselves and their world. The most consequential misunderstandings often arise not from inadequate vocabulary, but from unexamined assumptions about meaning, intention, and context. The articles in this volume contribute meaningfully to that mission. They remind us that language education stands at the intersection of technology and humanity, measurement and meaning, local practice and global engagement. Most importantly, they affirm that language learning remains, at its core, an encounter with other human beings and the worlds they inhabit.

I thank my longtime friend and colleague Dr. Jeff Watson and all the contributors to this edition for continuing to further this dialog. I invite readers to engage these contributions not simply as discussions of instructional techniques or educational policy, but as reflections on one of humanity's most remarkable capacities: the ability to create, share, and transform meaning through language.