



Introduction to the Special Issue

Instructing Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture

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This special issue of *Applied Language Learning* is dedicated to innovative projects related to Instructing Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture (LREC). Since the passage of the Defense Language Transformation Roadmap (U.S. Department of Defense, 2005), the Department of Defense (now Department of War, DoW) has dedicated significant resources to building skillsets related to world language (WL) proficiency, cross-cultural competence (3C), and regional expertise. These resources led to new LREC programs across the DoD schools, training institutions, and service academies. The U.S. Military Academy at West Point, for example, began teaching world languages five days a week, opened its Center for Languages, Cultures, and Regional Studies (CLCRS), and developed an immersion program to send ~150 cadets abroad each semester to study languages in their native cultural contexts. All three service academies developed international program offices and increasingly embraced international exchange cadets/midshipmen from allied countries to “internationalize” their populations. The Air Force also opened its Air Force Culture & Language Center (AFCLC) and launched its Language-Enabled Airmen Program (LEAP). The Marine Corps also opened its Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL) (Watson, 2010).

Building on the 2005 DoD Roadmap, “A Roadmap for Cultivating and Managing Skilled Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture Talent: Phase One” (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023) identified a need “to improve the management of LREC talent” as a “vital step forward to ensuring the Department has a LREC workforce ready to meet mission needs of today and the challenges of tomorrow” (p. 3). This 2023 Roadmap led to modernization initiatives at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC) in Monterey, California. Goals included increasing the percentage of students who graduate with at least an ILR level of 2+ in both Listening and Reading and also increasing the recruitment and retention rates of Cryptologic Language Analysts. In 2022, DLIFLC was granted the authorization to offer Bachelor of Arts Degrees and in 2023 the Intermediate and Advanced language programs were re-aligned under one directorate, thereby

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increasing the accessibility of these courses, facilitating standardization, and maximizing talent utilization around the globe.

To introduce this special issue, it is important to first define the underlying tenets and skillsets that LREC instruction strives to produce in military personnel. Since the mid-2000s, the U.S. Department of Defense has increasingly recognized that success in contemporary military and security environments depends not only on technological superiority or kinetic capability, but on the human capacity to understand, interpret, and act within complex sociocultural systems. This recognition gave rise to the modern Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture enterprise, which integrates world language proficiency, cross-cultural competence, and regional understanding as mutually reinforcing capabilities rather than discrete and separate skill sets (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). Yet as the LREC enterprise has matured institutionally, an equally important question has emerged pedagogically: *How should LREC be defined and instructed in ways that genuinely prepare learners to operate across complex cultural landscapes?*

This special issue suggests that LREC is best understood through the lens of **cultural relativism** and that its instruction must therefore be **transformative** rather than merely informational. Cultural relativism is the principle that beliefs, values, and practices can only be meaningfully understood within their own cultural contexts (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). This principle provides the ethical and epistemological foundation for LREC. Without it, language instruction risks becoming mechanical, cultural instruction risks devolving into stereotyping, and regional expertise risks collapsing into static checklists of facts. With it, however, LREC becomes a developmental process that reshapes how learners perceive themselves, others, and the environments in which they operate.

Chapter 1 of *Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture in the Military: State of the Science* (Watson et al., 2025) situates LREC as a strategic response to the limitations exposed during military operations in the early 21st century, particularly in environments where U.S. forces encountered culturally embedded forms of resistance, influence, and legitimacy that could not be addressed through force alone. The resulting *Defense Language Transformation Roadmap* (2005) reframed language and regional expertise as warfighting competencies, while subsequent cultural initiatives sought to close persistent gaps in cross-cultural understanding. What emerges from this history is a clear insight: LREC is not additive. Language does not simply “support” culture (or vice versa), nor does culture merely contextualize regional knowledge. Rather, LREC functions as an integrated human capability aimed at navigating difference, ambiguity, and power across sociocultural systems.

If cultural relativism provides a foundation for LREC, **transformative instruction** defines *how* it should be taught. Watson and Leaver (2025) explicitly argue that transformative LREC instruction is a paradigm shift that moves beyond communicative competence toward personal and professional transformation. Drawing on the broader literature on transformative learning, they argue that effective LREC instruction develops bilingual and bicultural individuals capable of perspective-shifting, ethical reflection, and adaptive leadership in unfamiliar cultural environments.



TRANSFORMATIVE INSTRUCTION: BROADENING THE CONTEXT

Advanced language proficiency has long been the goal and focus of most WL programs across the DoD. The Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT) along with the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) proficiency scale serve as the goalpost and chief measure of this proficiency. However, in 2007, the Modern Language Association suggested that languages should be taught as a “core” element of cross-cultural competence (MLA, 2007). Building on this, in 2015, ACTFL published its *World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages*, the so-called “5 Cs:” Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities (ACTFL, 2015). These changes by our leading professional organizations reframed language education beyond proficiency alone and reorganized instructional principles around “interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational” modes of communication in order to emphasize learners’ ability to use language within authentic sociocultural contexts (ACTFL, 2015). This shift signals a broader departure from earlier models focused primarily on developing language proficiency toward developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). This also aligns with the MLA’s statement that language programs should produce “educated speakers who have deep translingual and transcultural competence” and situate language study within “cultural, historical, geographic, and cross-cultural frames” (MLA, 2007, p.4).

Moreover, transformative LREC instruction is grounded in the recognition that learning a language or culture – even if situated in its sociocultural complexity – is not a neutral cognitive activity. Rather, it is an encounter with difference that can unsettle deeply held assumptions about identity, values, and power. From this perspective, cultural relativism is not simply taught as a concept; it is *experienced* through carefully designed learning environments that confront learners with ambiguity, contradiction, and “disorienting dilemmas” that demand reflection and reassessment. These moments of cognitive and emotional disruption are not pedagogical failures but essential catalysts for transformation (Watson & Leaver, 2025).

Several articles in this special issue demonstrate this shift to a broader context for teaching language proficiency, specifically leveraging the unique capabilities of generative artificial intelligence (AI). For example, Kozlova at DLIFLC-Monterey in her article “**Generative AI in Foreign Language Education: A Scoping Review of Pedagogical Applications and Challenges**” as well as Swanson and Richey at the U.S. Air Force Academy in their article “**World Language Instructors’ Perceptions of Using Generative AI Tools**” explore the potential benefits of using AI chatbots as a potentially “disruptive” technology that has the potential to challenge our current methodologies. In his article “**Revolutionizing Language Learning: AI-Assisted Learning as a Catalyst for High Proficiency Attainment**,” Tan demonstrates how an AI-Assisted Learning Framework can assist students with error identification and reduction. It is vital for the future of LREC instruction to explore how large language models can help teachers contextualize their teaching approaches and feedback mechanisms while affording students ways to explore simulated communication in their personalized language practice (Kozlova, this issue).



Other articles in this issue also explore meaningful ways to integrate language and culture through technology-enhanced instruction. Lee and Kim, for example, in **“Beyond News and Documentaries: Developing a Corpus-Based Lexical Resource for Informal North Korean Speech”** investigated lexical variation across formal and informal registers in contemporary North Korean discourse, illustrating the importance of utilizing various types of texts in preparing students not only for language exams, but also for understanding the culture and connections of a community. Xu, Wang, and Bozeman, in **“Integrating a Streaming Series into the Curriculum to Foster Listening Proficiency and Cultural Competence,”** explored the contributions of narrative media to students’ development of listening skills and cultural understanding. In a joint study between West Point and DLIFLC-Monterey, Holloway, Gao, Qasem, and Miller investigate the highly relevant issue of motivational dynamics in the world language classroom. In their study, **“Motivational Dynamics among Persian Farsi Language Learners Across Two Military Institutions,”** they used guided reflective journals to explore how learners generate and maintain interest (through measures of grit and anxiety) to engage with their Persian language courses. This study highlights the importance of understanding individual differences of military learners and the “interplay between learner characteristics and motivational engagement” in military instructional environments (Holloway et al., this issue, p. 194). Similarly, Seibel in his commentary: **“A Letter from Valley Forge and Words of the Developing World: Knowing the ‘Why’ for Autonomous Language Learning”** discusses the importance of developing autonomous language learners. Seibel argues that learner motivation is vital for students at DLIFLC to attain proficiency in a short amount of time while also “fostering a love of the target language and culture” (p. 150). In this regard, instructors “must instill a sense of purpose” (p. 150) in their students in order to encourage the autonomous learning strategies that will increase “their survivability, adaptability, and potential to shape outcomes in the future conflicts that will unexpectedly arise in remote corners of the world” (p. 152).

Sun, Lemmons, Ruble, and Emeliyanova, in their study **“Integrating Cultural Competence into Army Special Operations Forces Basic Language Training,”** illustrate another important aspect of instructing LREC in this broader context. In their study, two interventions were used to instruct cultural competence in two groups of ARSOF students (Russian and Mandarin Chinese) at Fort Bragg: culture-general cross-cultural competence instruction and culture-specific intercultural communicative competence training. From the late 2000s to the early 2020s, the DoD invested in developing culture-general 3C models designed to cultivate core competencies across the general-purpose force.¹ As outlined in DoD Instruction 3126.01C and informed by Deardorff (2006), these competencies include “understanding culture, applying organizational awareness, cultural perspective taking, and cultural adaptability” (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2023, p. F-1). Accordingly, the Marine Corps’ *Culture General Guidebook* (Fosher & Mackenzie, 2021) emphasizes that cultural competence requires “a broad, multidimensional approach to culture training and education” grounded in “the interplay of intercultural concepts and skills” (p. 5). In principle, this reflects the integration of culture-general and culture-specific capabilities at the

¹ These training endeavors were led by organizations such as the Army’s TRADOC Culture Center (TCC), the Air Force’s Culture and Language Center (AFCLC), and the Marine Corps’ Center for Advanced Operational Culture and Language Center (CAOCL). See also Fosher & Mackenzie, 2021, Mackenzie & Fosher, 2023, and Mackenzie & Henk, 2025.



heart of cross-cultural competence. Unfortunately, for mostly logistical reasons, the DoD explored this interplay by developing separate training paths (Watson, 2010). Culture-general skills, considered less time-intensive and applicable to all cultures, were developed as pre-deployment toolkits, while culture-specific knowledge remained the purview of WL institutions such as DLIFLC and the service academies (Mackenzie & Henk, 2025). This division allowed for practical training solutions but limited opportunities for meaningful integration of LREC capabilities.

As the DoD shifted its operational priorities, funding for many culture centers declined and culture-general programs across the DoD were reduced or eventually shuttered (Fosher & Mackenzie, 2021). As a result, this has shifted the responsibility to continue culture-general training to the better-funded and longer-standing WL organizations. While WL programs do not reach the majority of the force, they nonetheless represent an existing and institutionally viable venue for sustaining and advancing culture-general competencies. However, as demonstrated by Sun et al.'s findings, not all WL teachers are trained to incorporate culture-general 3C frameworks into their culture-specific WL classes. The result is a “teachability dilemma” in which there is a continued need for WL instructors to both appreciate the value of these 3C culture-general models and integrate them into the more familiar ICC frameworks. Similarly, the assessment of ICC skills has also been an ongoing challenge for WL instructors. In **“Framing Intercultural Reflection in the Language Classroom,”** Tozcu and Eagle outline a clear, pedagogically grounded way to embed ICC into language learning while meeting curricular demands for clarity and accountability. The authors demonstrate how to shift the focus from assessing ICC to documenting and supporting student engagement with foundational ICC concepts, such as perspective-taking, flexibility, and awareness of unspoken assumptions. The articles in this issue thus convey many of the complexities confronted by WL teachers both inside and outside of military contexts.

REGIONAL EXPERTISE

The RE of LREC is often the least discussed and perhaps the least understood. Historically, the DoD has defined regional expertise as a “multidimensional construct” representing knowledge “of a region’s social, economic, political, and linguistic features” (Paletz et al., 2018, p. 528). Mackenzie & Henk (2025) further point out that regional experts are those with extensive knowledge of “U.S. interests and involvements, nation-states and their interests, international organizations, regional and local conflicts, regional histories, politics, societies, natural environments, [and] economies” (p. 45). As such, regional experts, such as Foreign Area Officers (FAOs), attachés, or Security Cooperation Officers (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2023), develop in-depth culture- and region-specific knowledge, including significant foreign language proficiency, education, and sustained in-region experience. The skill sets of regional experts, however, do not inherently ensure the transferable, adaptive skills associated with cross-cultural competence, that is, “the ability to quickly understand and adjust to the cultural environment of new and unfamiliar operational areas” (Mackenzie & Henk, 2025, p. 47). As a result, instructing



regional proficiency must include training that promotes the cultural agility to set aside “cognitive biases and work within the patterns of thinking of host nation (or partner) actors” (p. 47). To illustrate this, Schendel and Kerlin from DLI-Washington, in their article **“An Artificial Intelligence-Enabled Tool for Real-Time Intercultural Competence Instruction,”** explored the benefits of incorporating an AI-enabled cross-cultural training tool (Cross-cultural Interaction Real-time Assistant for Negotiators and Operations – CIRANO) within a 64-week Mandarin Chinese course through scenario-based interactive activities. Their findings illustrate how culture-specific and culture-general competencies interact in practice. This collaboration not only facilitated authentic communication and a better understanding of Chinese cultural norms (culture-specific) but also helped students practice cross-cultural skills such as perspective-taking, adaptability, and self-awareness (culture-general). Students became more aware of their posture, emotional tone, eye contact, and “their own communication patterns and linguistic choices in English” resulting in “adjustment of their behavior” to fit the scenario (Schendel & Kerlin, 2026, p. 87). This type of training aligns well with the “leader/influence” skillsets outlined in DoD Instruction 3126.01C pertaining to exerting cross-cultural influence while also at times utilizing an interpreter, or in this case, an interpretation tool (See Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Enclosure F).

LANGUAGE TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT

Building and assessing students’ language proficiency, the “L” of LREC, is fundamental to any WL program. This special issue thus includes two articles focusing on language development and assessment. **“The Impact of Linguistic Knowledge on Reading and Listening Comprehension Across ILR Proficiency Levels,”** by Sun-Kwang Bae, investigates the extent to which vocabulary, structural, and discourse knowledge predict reading and listening comprehension at various proficiency levels. Bae finds that learners gradually shift from a heavy reliance on lexical knowledge at lower proficiency levels toward a more coordinated use of lexical, structural, and discourse knowledge at higher levels, particularly in reading.

In addition to assessing language proficiency, assessment of learners’ second language aptitude remains an important issue across the DoD. In 2020, West Point began using the Pre-Defense Language Aptitude Battery (Pre-DLAB) from the DLIFLC to help place cadets into world language courses, especially the more challenging Category III (Russian, Persian) and IV (Arabic, Chinese) languages. Pendergast, Dean, and Jannusch, in **“Language Aptitude as Predictor of Performance”** discuss the changing realities of student placement in WL courses, with cadets periodically being assigned to study languages they had not selected. In this context, they evaluate the effectiveness of different aptitude tests (and other variables) at West Point in predicting expected performance. Their finding on which aptitude assessments (i.e., the MLAT and Pre-DLAB) best predict performance provides useful information for any program facing similar challenges.



CONCLUSION

In closing, LREC skillsets remain vital to the DoW's ability to "exercise positive influence throughout the world" (Executive Office of the President, 2025). LREC is not only a supporting capability; it is an operational necessity. Building cooperative security partnerships, improving interoperability with allies, strengthening cryptologic and human intelligence gathering, and developing cross-cultural leaders that represent U.S. interests at home and abroad require these LREC skillsets and are a crucial part of our warfighting arsenal. Teachers who skillfully craft transformative lessons that leverage emerging technology, practice cross-cultural adaptability and perspective-taking, and strengthen language proficiency grounded in intercultural communicative competence and nuanced regional understanding play a critical role in developing these capabilities. We hope this special issue contributes to those efforts and advances the ongoing conversation about preparing military personnel to communicate, lead, and win in an increasingly complex cross-cultural environment.

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