

# Foreign Language Studies in India: Some Critical Observations

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**Key Words:** Foreign language studies, Vocational skills, Humanitarian values, Transcultural competence

## Abstract

This paper is concerned with the dilemma faced by foreign language studies. On the one hand, foreign language education has humanistic leanings and on the other it is increasingly tending to vocational skills. It argues that these two positions need not be seen in opposition. Anchored in a philological perspective, the paper takes stock of foreign language studies in India to elucidate the dilemma. It looks at the narrow vocational focus and increasing corporate culture brought into foreign language curricula and universities respectively. It proposes "transcultural competence" as the "humanistic learning objective", to balance effectively the dilemma confronting foreign language learning. Given this objective, the paper talks of the identity of a foreign language teacher, who in the transcultural perspective is a mediator between cultures. In addition, the responsibility of a foreign language teacher is to help students not only to discover the foreign culture but also to look at own culture/tradition afresh and to begin questioning one's understanding of oneself all over again.

To have another language is to possess a second soul. —Charlemagne  
 He (Charlemagne) might have added that to teach another language is to implant a second soul. —John le Carré

While learning a professionally "useful" foreign language is becoming increasingly popular in India, foreign language studies as a philological discipline seems to be at the crossroads. It is confronted with a "curricular dilemma" (Mathachan, 2018) with foreign language study as humanistic education on one hand and foreign language learning as a vocational skill on the other. The two sides of this "dilemma" are not necessarily mutually exclusive. However, they do constitute a point of departure to reflect upon the state of this field of study in India today. The attempt here is to open up a discussion on the relevance of foreign language study from within the discipline via reflections on a few key questions, namely:

1. Who are we?
2. Where are we today?
3. What are the challenges before us?

I would like to approach these questions by first taking stock of where we are as a discipline today, identify the challenges that we face and try to reach an understanding of who we are through the way we respond to those challenges. While the discussion here addresses mainly European languages, there might be pointers for other foreign language groups as well, such as East Asian, African and Asian languages.

## Foreign Language Studies in India: Where are we today?

The last available report of the Curriculum Development Committee of the UGC (UGC

CDC) for Western European Languages is from the year 2000-2001 (UGC 2001). It finds that many of the problems related to the teaching of foreign languages in India enumerated in the 1990 report are still valid even in the year 2000-2001.

The primary "problem" the committee mentions in the report is the fact that foreign language studies have still "not received their due importance" as independent disciplines. The report then goes on to list other problems, which also "have not been adequately tackled". These are:

- There is no uniformity in the policies of the state education boards towards foreign languages; very few states have "provided for the teaching of foreign languages at the high school level".
- Very few universities offer graduate programmes in foreign languages; even at universities where a B.A. (Hons.) programme does exist and at other universities, which offer an advanced diploma, the facilities for further study—say at the M.A. level—are quite inadequate.
- At most Indian universities, foreign languages are bunched together in one department and/or are under the "jurisdiction" of departments of English, linguistics, etc. The report says this "impedes the growth of foreign languages" as independent disciplines.
- Finally, the grants available for technology upgradation (computers, multi-media facilities etc.), for preparation of dictionaries and textbooks and so on are "very meagre".

In the preamble of the report, the committee notes the increase in the number of foreign languages offered at Indian universities together with the introduction of postgraduate programmes in Spanish, Italian and Portuguese and the increased need of the industry, especially the Communication and the IT sectors, for expertise in foreign languages since the "opening up" of the Indian economy.

In a recent Doctoral thesis done at the Centre of German Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, K. J. Mathachan (2018), explores *The Effect of Globalization and IT Offshoring on German as a Foreign Language in India*. While measuring the impact of globalisation and the IT-enabled services industry on teaching and learning of German as a Foreign language in India, Mathachan, through detailed analyses of relevant data and 30 interviews with teachers of German and other foreign languages, takes stock of the overall situation of university level teaching-learning of foreign languages in India in general, and German in particular. Almost two decades after the last UGC curriculum review, Mathachan provides a critical perspective on foreign languages as philological disciplines at universities in India, considering the commodification and commoditisation of higher education that has happened in the last 3 decades, particularly since 1991. Mathachan shows how in the context of foreign languages, learner motivation has become predominantly extrinsic. Today, hardly any learner is intrinsically motivated to "study" a foreign language and its literature for its own sake, or delve deep into it to discover the nuances of an other language, literature and culture (Mathachan, 2018).

Faced with a demand from the job market for foreign language "experts" skilled in business and technological communication, foreign language departments find themselves in a curricular dilemma in terms of balancing the "older" humanistic approach to higher education on which they were founded, with the "utilitarian" demand for limited skills, which would enable the learner to get a job as quickly as possible and be of use to the industry. The UGC CDC report for Western languages argues for market needs to be incorporated while updating the syllabi of foreign languages at universities and devotes one section to possible "Syllabi for Need-Based Courses". However, its primary concern

clearly seems to be the lack of recognition as independent disciplines that foreign languages in India suffer from. Mathachan (2018), drawing from an MLA report (2007) proposes "transcultural competence" as the "humanistic learning objective", to "balance effectively the current dilemma of foreign language learning". The MLA report (2007) argues:

The idea of translingual and transcultural competence, in contrast, places value on *the ability to operate between languages*. Students are educated to function as informed and capable interlocutors with educated native speakers in the target language. They are also *trained to reflect on the world and themselves through the lens of another language and culture.*" (italics mine).

The change cannot come into effect from above alone. Alongside our role as language teachers, we need to take our role as mediators between cultures equally seriously. The basic foreign language learning situation presents us with a unique opportunity: we get a bunch of young people who have, to some extent made a conscious decision to encounter the "other". As John le Carré (2017) says in an address to teachers of German in the UK:

The decision to learn a foreign language is to me an act of friendship. It is indeed a holding out of the hand. It's not just a route to negotiation. . . . And the decision to teach a foreign language is an act of commitment, generosity and mediation.

The educative potential of this situation is immense, and it is the responsibility of the teacher to make full use of it by at least offering possibilities of discovering the "other" through expressions of its culture

such as film and literature, for example. At departments which offer Certificate of Proficiency, Diploma of Proficiency and Advanced Diploma of Proficiency as feeder courses for postgraduate programmes, the language learning component could be accelerated, as suggested by the CDC in its 2000-2001 report, so that more can be offered in terms of exposure to literature, films and media. At universities and institutions which offer foreign languages only as optional papers, we must explore the possibility of offering courses that deal with aspects specific to cultures related to particular languages—area studies courses for example, or courses on literatures in translation. In a response to the MLA Report of 2007, Geisler (2008) emphasises the "need for specific historical, political, and institutional reference knowledge, without which cultural discourses (including literary discourse) cannot be fully understood."

To sum up this part of the discussion, one can learn more foreign languages in India today. However, departments of foreign languages have either remained static as far as curricular development is concerned or have successfully widened and deepened their curricula to enable learners to acquire a level of transcultural competence and are now faced with the dilemma of humanistic versus vocational/utilitarian education. We have a wider choice, but less willingness—on the part of learners and in many cases teachers, to go deeper into our subject.

## Challenges Before Foreign Language Studies in India

Since the opening up of her economy in 1991, India has seen a surface level lateral expansion of foreign languages in India. Though we might not have reason to talk about a crisis in foreign language learning

in India, it would be interesting to take a look at a few points Andrea Klaus and Nicola Reimann (2003), make in an article in *Info DaF*, on the situation of Germanistik at universities in Great Britain. Klaus and Reimann hold the spread of the so-called *enterprise culture* ushered into the field of education by the conservative government of Mrs. Thatcher as being responsible for developments which have led to the current crisis of German Studies (within foreign language studies in general) in the U.K. (Klaus & Reimann, 2003, 23) The signs of the corporate culture are seen in the university syllabi increasingly being moulded according to the needs of the industry, who are the main sponsor of higher education, which can jeopardize academic autonomy (Klaus & Reimann, 2003, 24); in imposing organisational and management structures of the industry on universities which made students as "customers" and courses as "products" which had to sell in the market. (Klaus & Reimann, 2003, 23) The very survival of many a department of foreign languages became dependent on the vagaries of the demand-supply dynamics of the Arbeitsmarkt (labour market). Needless to say, some did not survive the rigours of the quality control processes primarily because they had neither profit to show in terms of paying "customers" nor path-breaking cutting edge technological "products" (read profit-making courses and research output) (Klaus & Reimann, 2003, 23-24).

Things have not come to such a pass as far as foreign language studies in India are concerned. We are yet to hear of departments of foreign languages being closed or of permanent faculty members losing their jobs because there are few students and fewer or no publications. Although the number of jobs available at

universities has gone down and vacant posts are not being filled for years together, there are also instances of young universities introducing these disciplines into their academic programme and recruiting fresh staff.

The problem that foreign languages face in India today is that of being "degraded" from the status of philological, academic disciplines—even before being fully recognised as such!—to service departments servicing the demands of the market and the needs of industry. (See Mathachan, 2018, particularly Chapter 2). This must be resisted. It does not mean that we stop producing graduates who are good at German or Korean, who can guide foreign tourists, interpret and translate competently to earn a decent living. What it means is that in our understanding of our professional activity, we need to look beyond the immediate dictates of the market. To be sure, it is the responsibility of the educational establishment to guarantee curricular and pedagogical autonomy for academic institutions and disciplines and facilitate their development and growth. Reciprocally, it is our duty to guard and make use of such autonomy to preserve the core of foreign language studies as a discipline; its educative potential is no less and no more than that of any other academic discipline. It is in fact more conducive than many other disciplines to educating the individual to become cosmopolitan, a "world citizen". The terms "educative" and "cosmopolitan" are used here in the Goethean sense: Educative as in Goethe's understanding of *Bildung*—a process which leads an individual to realise his/her own potential, to realise/find him/her self; and cosmopolitan as in his understanding of *Weltbürger*—a person who is capable of reconciling in her lived praxis both patriotism and

cosmopolitanism, is capable of belonging to a culture and transcending it at the same time.

## Foreign Language Teachers in India: Who are we?

Sharmishtha Kher begins her article "Einige Bemerkungen zum Fremdsprachenunterricht und Deutschunterricht (B.A., M.A.) in Indien", published in the journal *German Studies in India: Indo German* in September 1982, with a rather matter-of-fact statement: "Ein Fremdsprachenexperte in Indien lebt ganz isoliert, identitätslos." (A foreign language expert in India lives totally isolated, devoid of any identity.) (Kher, 1982, 127). Although Kher holds the higher education establishment responsible to some extent for not giving foreign languages enough recognition, and for not having an "authentic educational policy" (*authentische Bildungspolitik*) with regard to foreign languages, the primary culprit according to her is the foreign language expert herself/himself, who remains content with being a language teacher instead of realising her/his role as an educator: "kaum als erzieher fungiert", meaning "hardly functions as an educator". More than three decades on, John le Carré too seems to point that way by acknowledging and at the same time reminding the foreign language teacher of her role:

It's a promise to educate—yes—and to equip. But also to awaken; to kindle a flame that you hope will never go out; to guide your pupils towards insights, ideas and revelations that they would never have arrived at without your dedication, patience and skill. (John le Carré, 2017)

We need to ask ourselves today, how seriously we consider this when we think about who we are as foreign language educators. Mediating between languages and cultures is a hermeneutic act: understanding the other by putting oneself in the other's position, but also completing the Gadamerian "hermeneutic circle", (Gadamer, 2013, xxxii) and through the understanding of the other coming to a better, more enriched, critically enhanced understanding of oneself. This requires the foreign language teacher to fulfil her role as an educator, effecting a vital shift in her self-understanding. This shift is vital because unless she realises her role as a teacher in the educative sense and not merely the trainer-sense of the word, it would not be possible to do justice to nor to preserve the core of foreign language philologies as autonomous disciplines.

If we understand ourselves as educators, we would have to anchor our pedagogical objective beyond competent language and soft-skills training, perhaps in helping the learner of a foreign language and the students of foreign language literatures not only to discover a foreign

culture/tradition but also to look at their own culture/tradition afresh and to begin questioning their understanding of themselves all over again. (See also MLA Report, 2007, 3-4). The precise articulation of such a goal will differ from individual to individual, but the ethical necessity of being a good teacher (in the sense of an educator) must and will be inherent in any such articulation. For, any learning in the true sense of the word cannot exclude the study of the self. (It is indeed a sign of the times and an irony that so many "institutions of learning" offer self-study courses in the correspondence mode.)

To end on a more practical note: as purveyors of foreign languages we will have to address these questions about how we look at ourselves. There is no choice really, because it is a matter of our survival. Interactive computer programmes will soon be (or may be already are) good enough for basic language classes to be conducted without a teacher. The human and humanising element in the foreign language studies classroom can be preserved only if the final goal is anchored beyond soft-skills training and mediation of information.

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