

A Model for a Bi-lingual Curriculum

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Abstract

There has been an increasing demand for multilingual professionals, in various fields including engineering, which in turn lead to the increased demand and resurgence in bilingual curricula and programs. Globalization have attributed to this resurgence, where there is an ever-increasing demand for ‘mobile’ workforce capable of communicating, both socially and professionally, with coworkers of different mother languages.

The paper describes and assesses three models for multilingual curricula. The models are assessed based on satisfying the cultural and professional aspects of the language. A bilingual English/Arabic model was developed and implemented at Zayed University. The model is designed to keep away from the shortcomings in currently used models.

Introduction

According to a recent survey study¹ by the Modern Language Association of America (MLA) “Language study at American colleges and universities has increased broadly and significantly since 2002. Language enrollments on United States campuses are at their highest since the 1960”. The survey found significant increases in enrollments in nearly all of the traditional popular languages (Spanish, French, and German) as well as in the newly emerging languages (Chinese, Arabic, and Korean). It is believed that students increasingly see their futures taking place in a multilingual world, and they want language skills to help them in professionally function in cross cultural environments.

Among the factors that contributed to this trend is the ever-increasing demand for workforce mobility to serve the newly ever-emerging foreign markets. Foreign markets that will continually emerge as the world continually flatten². Foreign markets that are best served with workforce that is competent in foreign languages.

Nowadays, we are witnessing global competition for multilingual workers in all professional fields³. For the Computer Industry, foreign markets are the new targets for US software companies, particularly China and Southeast Asia. The large number of jobs will be in sales and marketing where, for many positions, knowledge of languages and culture differences will be necessary skills. Programming a computer using any common language (such as everyday English, Spanish, or any other language) to do what computer languages (such as FORTRAN) are now doing. In the field of telecommunication, the demand for high-speed data services, Internet voice communication, and data networks, has increased on a worldwide basis. This moved telecom companies to look abroad for new business and qualified multilingual workers (e.g. India). In the engineering field, to benefit from the globalize expertise in design (e.g. India) and manufacturing (e.g. China), multilingual workforce is needed to facilitate productive communications.

It should also be pointed out that as the US population grows in diversity, there will be a rising demand for localized multilingual workers. Employers will be seeking multilingual workers to fill positions at all levels, including but not limited to, translators, quality control officers, software developers, and project managers.

Models for Teaching Multi-language

High education institutions in several countries, are now preparing their students, the future workforce, to be, at least, bilingually competent⁴. Their common goal is to equip students with the language skills needed to excel in a rapidly-changing and culturally-diverse global economy. The curricula are developed to prepare students both culturally and professionally in order to enable them to socially live and function in globalized communities. Curricula that offer students the utilitarian aspects of language study and a functional basic vocabulary in multiple career clusters (engineering, business, health, etc.). That is what is referred to, in this context, as competency in a language⁵.

Several multilingual curricula models are available; including the following three. In the first model, the institution offers professional fields of study in more than one language. The student has the choice to select the language of study⁶. Although the institution is referred to as bi-lingual, the graduates, in accordance with our definition in this context, are mono-lingual. This is valid, even when some of them are fluent in mother tongue languages which are different from the language of instructions. The reason, is for the lack of learning the cultural aspects of the language.

The second curricula model is for institutions located in countries where the language of instruction is different from the mother language of student. An example is the AUC (American University in Cairo) where the language of instruction is English and the mother tongue of student is Arabic. In this case, and in accordance with our definition of language competency, graduates lack competencies in both English and Arabic, because of the lack of the cultural and professional aspects of the languages, respectively. To improve competency in English, students are allowed to attend and transfer credits from approved programs at US universities⁷. Similar example is the ESC Rennes School of Business in France⁸. Students enrolled in school have tens of mother tongue languages. The main language of instructions is French. However, students have a study placement abroad for between six months and one year in one of the 127 partner universities worldwide. So that, graduates can gain bilingual competency in French and any other language of his choice (it could be his own mother tongue language).

The third curricula model, is where student use both cultural and professional aspects of languages. This is best exemplified by universities in multi-ethnic societies; where more than one language is used, as in the case of HU⁴ (Helsinki University). Every student, irrespective of his/her major field of study, had to attain certain skills level in the country's second official language; Swedish, if the student's mother tongue was Finnish, and Finnish, if student's mother tongue is Swedish. Graduates are considered bilingually competent in both languages.

Bilingual Model at Zayed University

The Arabic language is the heritage language of students and it is the essence of their cultural and national identity. English, as the most widely spoken world language, is equally important. Embedded in the educational philosophy at ZU that the University graduates will gain a distinct world class identity if they are proficient in both Arabic and English. It is in the core belief that ZU graduates who are proficient in both Arabic and English will have access to a much wider range of resources and opportunities than graduates who have only one language.

The main language of instruction at ZU is English, and it has adopted Western academic standards. There is much emphasis on proficiency in the English language. Students are taught for 2 years, prior to enrolling in their major, in English by expatriates from different English speaking countries including England, USA, Canada, and Australia. The students are also encouraged to enroll in study abroad programs to enhance their cultural aspects of the English language.

The need for Arabic was established after early surveys of employers and Alumni revealed that certain employers, such as government and civil service, were unhappy with the lack of Arabic language skills of ZU graduates. Consequently, integrated Arabic curricula were introduced using a model that resembles the third model explained above.

At ZU, Arabic is introduced at two levels; in the general education curriculum (Colloquy on Integrated Learning) and in the colleges. The COL sequence is aimed at developing the students' language skills over three semesters. The first course in the sequence focuses on language receptive (listening and reading) as well as productive (speaking and writing) skills. It also attempts to modernize the teaching of Arabic, by using text related to the Majors rather than traditional literature. In doing so, students get the added benefit of learning about the Majors before making their choices late in the semester.

The outcomes for this sequence are designed to prepare the students for the following phase, which is Arabic in the discipline, i.e. Functional Arabic. These preparations attempt to change the students' speaking habits so that presentations and discussions are conducted in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). The ratio of colloquial and foreign words in normal and academic conversations is one of the basic issues tackled in the sequence. So is planning for writing, researching and critical thinking. The latter issues are new to students and are significantly important in developing their abilities to communicate their ideas in an effective manner.

In the colleges, a different scheme has been devised; Arabic Labs were attached to at least two courses taught in each college. The content was driven by the English courses under the control of the college. The Arabic Lab simply shadowed the main course and used its content to teach the language. The Arabic Labs are proactive teaching sessions focusing on the various linguistic skills and adding translation and terminology aspects as needed. Students are encouraged to work in groups to produce a Terminology Translation Table (TTT) in MSA from the English content. This is then made available to them throughout their university years and beyond. This has proved to be a very useful tool. Even developing the TTT has benefited the students by improving their searching, context choice, verification and quality control. All are important skills for today's technological work place. Typically, the English course will have three contact hours and three credits, whilst the associated Arabic Lab will have two credit hours.

The syllabus for the Arabic Lab is derived from that of the English course it shadows. To reduce the burden on students, most assignments given in the Lab are based on those given in the course. Students are then asked to produce the assignments in Arabic and any subsequent discussions are conducted in Arabic. Lab sessions normally incorporate a presentation by one student or a group of students of the substance of the content taken in the previous course session. Discussions by all students follow the presentations. Students take it in turn to produce the presentations. In preparing for them, students have to search deeper for translations of technical or discipline specific terms they encounter in addition to fully understanding the subject. They start building the TTT at this stage.

The mere task of preparing a presentation, translating and searching for terms, enhances the student's understanding of the subject considerably. Tutors of the English courses often appreciate the greater understanding achieved through this process.

To work this scheme properly, a great deal of co-operation and collaboration is normally required between both faculties. Without such collaboration, the tie between the course and its supporting Lab is lost and each would go its own way, negating that positive result of greater subject understanding mentioned above and increasing the burden on the students by having to do separate assignments for both faculties.

The over-riding philosophy is that sufficient time should be spent developing the two languages and that the instruction should be done concurrently, so that students are able to move between the two languages seamlessly in a professional context. Each discipline has its own conventions when it comes to writing and it is important for students to become aware of them and to be able to produce a paper or presentation that conforms to those conventions when asked.

It should be mentioned that the above courses have become integral part of Arabic Across the Curriculum (AAC), an innovative language program which started at ZU in September 2001. The learning outcomes will enable students to:

1. Employ appropriate language and style in academic writing
2. Articulate ideas and elaborate on them clearly and accurately
3. Develop coherent and well-organized discourse
4. Use linguistic syntax correctly
5. Write summaries, short essays, and commentaries related to subjects studied
6. Use basic referencing conventions for a scholarly source
7. Use a range of vocabulary appropriate to the subject matter
8. Develop critical acumen, deeper understanding of texts' nuance and aesthetics
9. Read a variety of Arabic texts and analyze them
10. Mastery of oral and written presentational skills

Conclusions

Diversity of languages has become a valuable resource for any nation that wants to remain competitive in the rapidly ever-changing global economy. We possess such diversity and we should cherish, develop, and use it for the betterment of our nation. We should study and benefit from other educational experiences in foreign languages. We, the professionals, should help in the transition to the "tossed salad/multi-lingual" concept from the "melting pot/mono-lingual" concept.

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- 6) Institute of Finance and Management (<http://www.universiteifm.com>)
- 7) A student from AUC is currently taking professional courses at JMU
- 8) ESC Rennes School of Business (<http://www.school-business.com>)