

The Role of Multilingualism in Effectively Addressing Global Issues: The Sustainable Development Goals and Beyond

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Abstract—In a globalized, interconnected world, multilingualism is essential for effective communication, understanding of other cultures, and the development of global citizenship values. In addition to being part of a global personal cultural identity and a practical tool for communication in transnational teams, multilingualism has been linked to creativity and to problem-solving, both of critical importance in addressing complex issues, and regular use of more than one language has even been shown to stave off dementia. International organizations, multinational corporations, and educational institutions approach multilingualism differently, each with the language strategy that aligns most closely with their mission and goals. How can international educators best prepare students for an increasingly multilingual world and workplace where multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception?

Index Terms—multilingualism, sustainable development goals, global competency, language strategy, many languages one world

I. INTRODUCTION

Language, and languages, are how we communicate, and effective communication, although always desirable, is essential for effectively addressing complex issues and problems at all levels. The multiplicity of languages is felt especially at the international and global level, and societies and organizations have taken different approaches to languages and language policy.

Whether the issue involves education, the environment, health, or one of many other issues we face, the ability to communicate is essential to effectively addressing it. Effective communication forms the foundation of the ability to proactively address situations as they occur. In a global environment changing at an increasingly rapid pace, the importance of communicating ideas, and underlying subtext, is critical.

One of the most significant attempts to address the most challenging, and complex, global issues is the United Nations' Post-2015 Global Sustainable Development Agenda, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which follow the development and implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

While many organizations are examining the benefits and challenges of multilingualism, three initiatives are of great interest -- the ELAN (*École et langues nationales en Afrique*) program, launched by a collaborative partnership including the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), the 2016 Symposium on Language and the Sustainable Development Goals, organized by the Study Group on Languages and the United Nations, and the Many Languages One World Essay Contest and Global Youth Forum (MLOW), organized by the United Nations Academic Impact and ELS Educational Services.

II. THE VALUE AND IMPORTANCE OF MULTILINGUALISM – FROM CULTURAL AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE TO GLOBAL TALENT AND BEYOND

Knowledge and use of other languages has been linked to personal benefits such as the ability to enjoy literature and film in the original language, to enjoy travel more fully, and to be able to communicate with people either around the world or at home. Personal benefits have also included emotional intelligence and social skills, and multilingualism has an impact on our individual personal cultural identity (Vince, 2016).

Cognitive benefits have included enhanced knowledge of our first language and language in general also referred to as metalinguistic awareness, multi-tasking, perspective-taking, analytical cognitive strategies and cognitive control, improved financial choices, creativity and divergent thinking, and delayed onset of Alzheimer's disease and/or dementia. Academic benefits have included higher SAT scores for K-12 foreign language students.

Knowledge of other languages, offering insights into other cultures and key to appreciation and understanding of other cultures is also key to the interdisciplinary area of global understanding and intercultural competency, and the sign of a well-educated global citizen.

Multilingualism has been linked to emotional intelligence (EQ), cultural intelligence (CQ), and creative intelligence and innovation. Multilingualism has been cited as an element in effective problem-solving, for reasons ranging from

increased buy-in, or greater acceptability of a solution or process that is presented in a language or languages understood by all parties, to differences in memory among multilinguals. However, the most compelling reason is buy-in and acceptability.

Just as diversity has been shown to lead to more creative teams, linguistic diversity and multilingualism have been linked to creativity in individuals and in groups/teams.

Foreign language skills are required, or are rewarded, in many careers in government, international relations, education, and business. The growing global language services industry revenue is approaching \$40B per year, global travel and tourism accounts for over \$7T a year in revenue and for one in every 11 jobs in the world, and nearly 2B people around the world are English language learners (GALA, n.d.; Rivers, 2015, Statistics and Facts, n.d.).

According to (Rivers, 2015), a recent global talent survey found that 35% of mid- and large size companies give preference to multilingual candidates, and 11% are actively recruiting candidates with foreign language skills.

It is precisely this constellation of benefits that multilingualism brings to the individual, to a group or team, and to an organization that makes it the critical global competency.

- **Language Strategy**

According to (Neeley and Kaplan, 2014), “language pervades every aspect of organizational life.”

International organizations, multinational corporations, and educational institutions approach language strategy in accordance with their mission and goals.

The United Nations has been proactive in promoting its policy of multilingualism, with 6 official languages representing its nearly 200 members. The United Nations Academic Impact (UNAI), with its core value of “shared culture of intellectual social responsibility,” has taken the UN policy of multilingualism to university students around the world, especially through its principle #6, “a commitment to encouraging global citizenship through education.”

The European Union, with 24 official languages and 2 working languages, has developed a policy of plurilingualism, often referred to as “mother tongue + 2”, based on its core value of multilingualism. Its Erasmus program supports the development of linguistic and intercultural skills through study abroad.

Multinational corporations may choose a *lingua franca* to facilitate communication among employees internally while using local languages in the marketplace, and corporations including Renault, Samsung, and Airbus have opted for an English corporate language strategy.

International sports are another area where multilingualism is the norm, and the official languages of the Olympics include French and English, along with the official language of the host country (Lyall, 2016). Many global sports localize their social media (Henchman, 2016), and in 2016, the MLB has mandated Spanish translators for all U.S. baseball teams (Double Play, 2016; Guardado, 2016).

III. MULTILINGUALISM AS A GLOBAL COMPETENCY

“Learning another language offers another view of the world.” (Adams and Carfagna, 2006, p. 174)

In addition to serving as a means of communication, language – our mother tongue and the other languages we speak – is part of our personal cultural identity, shaping our worldview and values, and empowering us to see various perspectives and possibilities.

The role of language in a multilingual world needs to be considered as both a means of communicating an idea or a goal and also as a tool to engage and build buy-in among stakeholder groups and to develop solutions that address the needs of all stakeholder groups.

Examples of programs/events examining and highlighting the role of language and of multilingualism include the ELAN Program, the Many Languages One World Essay Contest and Global Youth Forum (MLOW), and the 2016 Symposium on Language and the Sustainable Development Goals.

- ELAN-Africa: “A Francophone initiative promoting bilingual education to better succeed at school”

The ELAN program is an interesting example of collaborative partnership, including national governments through their ministries of education and international agencies, coordinated by the OIF, to offer the advantages of both mother tongue and bilingual education. Introduced initially in 8 countries (Benin, Burkina-Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Mali, Niger, Democratic Republic of Congo and Senegal) in Phase 1, 2013-2015, it has been expanded in 2016 to include 4 additional countries (Guinea, Togo, Madagascar, and Côte d’Ivoire) in Phase 2, 2016-2018 (ELAN, n.d.; Elan, 2014).

The importance of this initiative lies in the increase in student learning outcomes through a plurilingual approach.

Language of instruction is a complex issue, with local and/or minority languages in disadvantaged areas not always a local medium of instruction. In order to increase student learning outcomes, the earliest instruction takes place in the local mother tongue, with French gradually introduced.

Based on research, including the Lascolaf (Schooling Languages in French-Speaking Africa) project, the ELAN (*Écoles et langues nationales en Afrique*) program was developed in order to increase student achievement through use of the mother tongue as the initial language of instruction. Initially launched in 8 francophone countries, it has been expanded to include four additional countries in June 2016.

In addition to reflecting the local educational plans, it is in alignment with the Millennium Development Goal 2, to “achieve universal primary education,” and launched in 2013 by *the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie*

(OIF) in collaboration with several partners, offers a model of multilingual education supported by current research indicating that inclusion of the learner's native language in early education leads to better learning outcomes.

Education has also been specifically addressed in the post-2015 United Nations Global Development Agenda Sustainable Development Goal 4 -- "Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning," although language is not specifically addressed and could be considered either implicit within the framework of multilingualism at the UN, or a missing dimension in the conversation on Goal 4 and across the Sustainable Development Goals generally, going forward.

According to OIF Secretary-General Michaëlle Jean, "*Dans l'espace francophone, l'amélioration de la qualité de l'éducation en contexte multilingue doit tenir compte de la langue maternelle de l'enfant, tout en ouvrant sur le monde avec la langue française. Je considère ELAN comme un choix éducatif que je crois déterminant pour l'avenir* (ELAN, n.d.)."

• Many Languages One World (MLOW)

The Many Languages One World Essay Contest and Global Youth Forum (MLOW) is an example of the many ways in which multilingualism empowers a diverse community to both communicate and to work together to address a complex global issue.

Inspired by the vision of the United Nations Academic Impact and of the late President J. Michael Adams of Fairleigh Dickinson University, MLOW was launched in late 2013 in preparation for the 70th anniversary of the UN. Its purpose was to promote multilingualism and celebrate its role in global citizenship, as well as the continued study of the six official UN languages (Many Languages, n.d.).

In describing MLOW, ELS CEO Mark Harris said, "for the 70th anniversary of the United Nations, which is this June, we created an essay contest to celebrate the role of language learning in global citizenship (Many Languages, 2014)."

It has been held each year, beginning in 2014. The essay contest, open to full-time college and university students, invites students to write an essay in a learned second language, one of the six official languages of the United Nations, on a pre-determined topic. The topics have included the role and significance of multilingualism in global citizenship and the United Nations Post-2015 Global Development Agenda, the essay itself an exercise in critically examining a complex global issue through the lens of a learned second language.

After finalists are interviewed and winners selected, the winners -- typically 10 for each of the 6 official languages of the UN, or "70 for 70" in 2015, for the 70th anniversary of the UN -- are brought to New York where they spend a week on a local campus preparing presentations on a pre-determined topic in the learned second language of their winning essay. Topics have included the UNAI Principles, the themes of the UN Post-2015 Global Development Agenda, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the development of the group presentation is an exercise in transnational multilingual teamwork and in effectively addressing a complex global issue through a multilingual lens.

The ability of the students to communicate on complex global issues and to engage as a team in creative problem-solving in the second language of their winning essay, remarkable in itself, is surpassed only by their ability and willingness to cross linguistic and cultural boundaries in both serious and social conversation with members of the other language groups, always finding a language combination that works.

In affirmation of the importance of multilingualism, the conclusion of the 2016 French language team's presentation urged the audience -- and all of us -- to "*parier sur l'éducation et sur le multilinguisme afin de créer des citoyens responsables et engages* (Many Languages, 2016)."

In 2015, ELS CEO Mark Harris concluded his remarks at the UN after the student winner presentations, with "I would like to challenge these young people and their predecessors from last year to form a *confrérie*, to form MLOW global community, but I challenge you to keep this sense of *fraternité*, *d'égalité*, and as our last friend said, *liberté*, and stay together because the harmony and communication across cultures and across nations, using language and otherwise, is what's necessary to save this world and save this earth."

In his remarks at the conclusion of the 2016 MLOW presentations in the UN General Assembly Hall, Ramu Damodaran, Chief, UNAI Secretariat, urged student winners to think of MLOW as "make life our way," highlighting the power of conversations that are only possible in a multilingual setting to transform the world.

As mini reunions take place around the world, and student winners from all years continue to keep in touch through social media, the camaraderie observed during the Global Youth Forums continues.

• Symposium on Language and the Sustainable Development Goals

The 2016 Symposium of the Study Group on Language and the United Nations addressed the role of language in the implementation of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals, concluded that "all of the SDGs interface with language, either as a substantive element of the goal itself (language as a goal) or as a means of communication, dialogue, response, and implementation (language as a tool)" and "stress(ed) the urgent need to include language at the planning, implementation, and assessment stages of each of the SDGs (Language and the UN, n.d.)."

Meeting in New York City at the UN Church Centre, just across the street from the UN on the very dates that the Paris climate accord was being signed by Heads of States and dignitaries from around the world, over 120 academics, UN officials, and others attended the two-day symposium which examined the role and significance of language in the implementation of the SDGs.

Presenters discussed the general absence of language in the 17 goals, examining in particular Goal 4, "Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning," and language of instruction, and focusing especially on especially on Goal 17, "Partnerships for the Goals: Revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development," which implicitly requires multilingualism in order to communicate and engage global stakeholders.

In light of the emphasis placed on the power of language, one of concluding presentations, on the process of developing a uniform translation for "empowerment (*empoderamiento*)" in Spanish was especially interesting linguistically, and inspiring politically and socially.

- **Cultures and Languages across the Curriculum (CLAC)**

The CLAC (Cultures and Languages across the Curriculum) Consortium encourages an interdisciplinary approach to foreign language education on the college and university level, developing an open online repository of teaching materials and providing a forum where scholars and practitioners can share experiences and best practices both on a regular basis through social media and in-person at national conferences held regularly every 12 to 18 months over the past decade (Cultures and Languages, n.d.).

The CLAC approach builds on the concepts of translingual and transcultural competence set forth in (MLA 2007), and implicitly on a tradition of intercultural learning in the foreign language classroom and on a body of scholarly literature represented by the work of (Byram, 2008) and many others.

Strengths of the CLAC approach include its applicability both in the classroom and beyond, including in experiential learning and study abroad, and its ability to motivate students by highlighting the real-world importance of language as a tool to address both professional and social issues in a globalized, multilingual world.

Interdisciplinary partnerships exist within specific institutions and beyond, among institutions, and with external partners.

- **The *Révolution bilingue française***

The Révolution bilingue française refers to a number of dual immersion programs in the New York City public schools that has expanded to adjacent North Jersey. Building on a partnership among parents, educators, school administrators, and supported by the French government, the *révolution bilingue française* empowers English-speaking students in the world's iconic global city, to add French, a global language, to their skill set, while also empowering French-speaking students from around the world to develop and maintain levels of proficiency in both French and English appropriate for use in the workplace through the immersion program and related French heritage language programs (Ross and Jaumont, 2013; Semple, 2014).

This program is noteworthy in its multiple-stakeholder partnerships, its nature as an immersion program, its implementation of a large-scale French language immersion program in the New York City public schools, and in its examination of the potential for public-private partnerships and philanthropy in funding public education initiatives.

IV. MULTILINGUALISM IN ACTION – MULTILINGUALISM AS THE NEW NORMAL

In addition to the importance of shared linguistic and cultural knowledge in starting the conversation and supporting buy-in of diverse stakeholders, it is important to remember the benefits of multilingualism to the individual and to a group or society.

Language skills may be required and rewarded in the workplace, or may enhance our professional lives.

For example, people who know more than one language demonstrate increased creativity, problem-solving skills, and increased cultural intelligence. Cultural awareness and sensitivity are skills that appear to only be increasing in importance in the face of globalization. As organizations, both profit and mission driven, become increasingly global in operations and composition, individuals must adapt.

- **Multilingualism as Global Talent**

Complex issues that are multi-faceted and involve a broad base of interested parties are also where the greatest effect can be generated, and language skills help immensely in addressing these issues.

Goal 17, perhaps most clearly, demonstrates a real world connection between the importance of language in a multilingual world, the SDG's, the United Nations, and individuals in positions to effect the necessary change. Specifically, the incorporation of language into the discussion of sustainability and sustainable development, usually a local initiative, requires that participants and experts be able to communicate smoothly, and without cultural friction. A key aspect of this future, and of the potential benefits of increased global sustainability, is multilingualism. Preparing future generations of global citizens will require a multilingual and multicultural framework - the United Nations is ideally situated to play a leading role.

- **International Education in a Multilingual World**

In remarks made at the UN, Michaëlle Jean, the Secretary-General of the OIF affirmed the necessity of multilingualism, concluding with "*mais de faire en sorte que d'autres langues soient représentées. Il faut une mobilisation qui aille au-delà de nous seuls Francophones, que nous puissions nous mobiliser avec les hispanophones, les lusophones, pour dire, écoutez, ce n'est pas possible de tout en anglais qui nous exclut et qui en fait va à l'encontre de la démocratie internationale* (Destination Francophonie #122 – ONU, 2015)."

Multilingualism in education includes primary, secondary, and tertiary education in a mother tongue or second language, as home or abroad. However, in order to develop an international mindset and core values of global

citizenship, international education needs to take place at all levels, beginning in the very earliest years, with culture and language across the curriculum.

Foreign language education has typically included information about the target culture(s), and foreign language teachers from around the world have long described their role as one of teaching about other cultures and about intercultural competence. (MLA, 2007) emphasizes translanguaging and transcultural competence as the goals of foreign language education, and the Cultures and Languages across the Curriculum (CLAC) Consortium works to develop an international dimension in curriculum and on campus.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The well-known bilingual advantage is actually a multilingual advantage.

It is clear that multiple languages – representing multiple perspectives and multiple worldviews – are essential to encourage engagement on the part of multiple stakeholders, whose buy-in is an essential first step in developing a dialogue leading to resolution of complex issues.

In order to foster and encourage global citizenship and a sustainable world, society needs to view multilingualism as normal and desirable, and government, educators, and the private sector need to work together to develop the learning opportunities, accessible to all, and the curricula to make multilingualism a reality.

Language is everywhere present, and these conversations and solutions could not be developed without multilingualism.

As international educators, we can work together, and with partners in government and business, to raise awareness among young people around the world of the value of multilingualism and of foreign language skills and to create the curriculum, experiential learning and internship opportunities, and necessary partnerships with prospective employers.

At a grassroots level, we can support programs at all levels, ranging from K-12 immersion programs like New York's *révolution bilingue* in our own communities and postsecondary initiatives to internationalize the campus and the curriculum through study abroad and groups like the Cultures and Language across the Curriculum (CLAC) Consortium, and encourage their students to participate in programs and events like MLOW.

VI. CONCLUDING THOUGHT

It's all about the partnerships -- The ELAN Program, the Symposium on Language and the Sustainable Development Goals, MLOW, the *révolution bilingue*, CLAC, and many more. All are the result of collaborative language enterprise partnerships, and none would have been likely without them.

With multilingual skills and core values of global citizenship, our students have the tools to create a better world.

As the 2016 MLOW winners concluded, we must "*parier sur l'éducation et sur le multilinguisme afin de créer des citoyens responsables et engagés* (Many Languages One World, 2016)."

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