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Language in a Global World: A Case Study of Foreign Languages in U.S. K-8 Education

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Abstract

Over the past decade, there have been numerous calls to update U.S. education to reflect an increasingly global world (Hull & Hellmich, 2018). Foreign languages (FLs) are often perceived as central to these efforts (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2017). Despite this centrality, less is known about how FLs are understood in U.S. K-12 education today, particularly at the individual and school levels. Using an ecological theoretical frame and a case study research design, this article focused on one K-8 immersion school and examined 1) the discourses that teachers, administrators, parents, and students used to understand FLs in education; 2) how their understandings impacted the learning environment; and 3) how local beliefs and behaviors aligned with larger societal philosophies and practices. Findings revealed both areas of alignment

and divergence from previous literature and highlight the complex understandings that are used to position and guide FL education.

Keywords: all languages; case study; internationalization of curriculum; value of language learning

Language in a Global World: A Case Study of Foreign Languages in U.S. K-8 Education

Introduction

Over the past decade, there have been numerous calls for educational reform that reflects an increasingly global world (Hull & Hellmich, 2018; Mansilla & Jackson, 2011; Ortloff, Shah, Lou, & Hamilton, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2012). The learning of non-English languages has often been perceived as central to these efforts: policy reports from a range of national organizations, for instance, have singled out foreign¹ language linguistic and intercultural competencies as essential for today's citizenry and have supported new models for, and approaches to, foreign language learning across the American educational system (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2017; Council on Foreign Relations, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

Despite this linking at a macro level, ambiguity remains about how foreign languages (FLs) are currently understood in U.S. K-12 education, particularly at the school and individual levels. How do different school actors understand the benefits and practices that are involved in teaching and learning a language other than English? What roles are FLs imagined to play in schools? How do FLs fit into the American public's general understanding of K-12 learning goals and core content and the way in which they position learners to lead personally-meaningful and professionally-successful lives?

The current article responds to calls from the Douglas Fir Group (2016) to situate language learning within layered and interconnected levels. Specifically, this article deployed an ecological theoretical frame to examine the discourses that different school actors (teachers, administrators, parents and students) at one K-8 immersion school used to understand FL in

education today (micro level); how these discourses impacted the school (meso level); and how locally-produced discourses interacted with larger societal discourses (macro level).

Background

As has often been remarked, globalization has resulted in an increasing interconnectedness across traditional borders and boundaries, spurring change in a range of societal arenas (Appadurai, 1996; Blommaert, 2010; Kumaravadivelu, 2008; Rizvi, 2007). Education in the United States is no different, with the past 15 years witnessing a wave of calls, and efforts, to update K-12 education for a global 21st century (Hull & Hellmich, 2018). Responding to these calls, schools (Hayden, 2011; Ortloff et al., 2012; Parker, 2011; Parker & Camicia, 2009), non-governmental organizations (Mansilla & Jackson, 2011), and national agencies (Council on Foreign Relations, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2012) have promoted a diverse set of orientations and skillsets that are seen as necessary for success in today's world.

The learning of languages other than English has often been considered central to these efforts (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2017; Council on Foreign Relations, 2012; Mansilla & Jackson, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2012). For example, the U.S. Department of Education (2012) linked foreign language acquisition and skills to global competence, citing the power of language learning to improve communication, working relationships, and cross-cultural understanding (p. 7). Similarly, the Council on Foreign Relations (2012) situated foreign languages among the “vital” subjects for national security and prosperity and recommended bolstering educational expectations in this area (p. 44). Federally-funded programs like the Fulbright U.S. Scholars Program and the Boren Fellowship emphasize the importance of language competences for understanding, communicating, and protecting

national interests across borders. More recently, the American Academy of Arts and Science's report "America's Languages: Investing in Language Education for the 21st Century" (2017) framed FL learning as "critical to success in business, research, and international relations in the twenty-first century" (p. viii).

Past and Present of Foreign Languages in the US

Despite this connection at a macro level, it remains unclear exactly how school personnel, learners, and other individuals understand the role and contribution of FLs to K-12 education in the United States. This ambiguity stems from at least three sources. First, learning languages other than English in the United States has a complex history, marked by periods of restriction and resurgence. For example, building up to and following WWI, FLs were seen as a threat to the isolationism that swept the country (García, 2009) as well as contradictory to the educational reforms taking place at the time (Watzke, 2003). Similarly, FL learning was deemed "useless and time-consuming" immediately following WWII, as the country sought national unity and addressed new educational demands (García, 2009, p. 167; Watzke, 2003). In contrast, FL learning has also witnessed surges in popularity at the national, state, and local levels, such as during the Cold War and following 9/11 (Kramsch, 2005; Met, 2008; Watzke, 2003).

Today, FL learning inhabits a peculiar position: on the one hand, there has been increased interest in language learning from different stakeholders. Alongside the calls to bolster linguistic competences cited above, for example, foreign language immersion education programs have increased in popularity (Harris, 2015; Lenker & Rhodes, 2007), growing from a handful of programs in the 1970s to over 400 programs in 2011 (CAL, 2011) and an estimated 590 in 2018 (CAL, 2018).² Moreover, foreign language requirements for U.S. college admission have held steady, if not increased, maintaining the structural importance of FL education at the K-12 level.

On the other hand, the resources and infrastructure needed to support foreign language learning have been threatened in recent years. For example, the U.S. Department of Education Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP), which granted funding for establishing or improving K-12 foreign language learning programs, was eliminated in 2012. Additional financial threats loom on the horizon as well: the proposed FY2018 budget would terminate Title VI, which funds, among other things, sixteen language resource centers around the country. There is a disconnect, then, between contemporary calls and subsequent actions regarding foreign language learning in the US.

Discourses of Language Learning

In addition to a complex history and peculiar present, a second source of ambiguity surrounding FLs in U.S. K-12 education today stems from the multiplicity of discourses—different ways of organizing, seeing, understanding the world (Foucault, 1978, 1981, 1995; Pennycook, 1994) and, in this case, ways of organizing, seeing, and understanding the role of FL in that world. Within this multiplicity of discourses, a common distinction is made between humanistic and instrumental. Humanistic discourses situate language learning in relation to its value in promoting connections and understanding among individuals, communities, and nations. Humanistic perspectives include seeing language learning as supporting an appreciation of other cultures, building an expanded perspective on the world, and fostering cross-cultural understanding (García, 2009; Kramsch & Zhang, 2017; Kubota & Catlett, 2008). A humanistic understanding of language also includes heritage and equity discourses, positioning language learning as a vital link to family background and to equal rights among citizens (García, 2009; Ruiz, 1984).

In contrast, instrumental discourses situate language learning in relation to pragmatic or utilitarian advantages across a range of realms. For example, language competences have long been understood as serving national military security, affording the nation the ability to communicate with and acquire intelligence on allies as well as enemies (Council on Foreign Relations, 2012; Parker, 2011; Perkins, 1980; U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Language learning can also be viewed as a way to bolster an individual's, as well as the nation's, economic presence on a global stage. In recent years, this economic orientation has intensified, with an increasingly-frequent focus on language learning in service of economic ends (Bernstein, Hellmich, Katznelson, Shin, & Vinall, 2015; Block, Gray, & Holborow, 2012). More recently, learning to read, write, and think in different languages has been understood as having a positive impact on the brain, particularly in terms of memory, attention, communication, and empathy (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2017; Jackson & Malone, 2009; Kroll & Dussias, 2017).

At the intersection of instrumental and humanistic discourses is another common understanding of FLs in the United States: the distinction gained by elective bi- or multilingualism (Bourdieu, 1979; García, 2009; Watzke, 2003). Proficiency in languages other than English has long stood as a marker of status in the United States (García, 2009) as well as a pathway to higher education (Watzke, 2003). While the languages seen to reap the most distinction have changed over time, this particular orientation to language frames both the instrumental and humanistic benefits of language learning in terms of status and access, particularly in educational spheres.

Ecological Approaches

A third source of ambiguity surrounding how FLs are understood in education today stems from scale. With some notable exceptions (e.g., Kubota & Catlett, 2008), much of the work done to identify the discourses used to understand the position of languages other than English in the U.S. educational system has remained at a macro level: for example, analyses have identified discourses of FL learning in American newspapers (e.g., Valdez, Delavan, & Freire, 2014), textbooks (e.g., Kramsch & Vinall, 2015) and governmental policies (e.g., Johnson, 2012). Examinations of the meso (institutional) or micro (individual) level have often focused on singular groups. For example, studies have looked at immersion school teachers (Walker & Tedick, 2000) or principals (Rocque, Ferrin, Hite, & Randall, 2016) and the challenges they face; parents who choose dual immersion schools (Parkes, 2008; Whiting & Feinauer, 2011); or students in bilingual education programs (Merisuo-Strom, 2007); however, studies have rarely looked across groups or within a single school environment. To better understand the ecology of language teaching and learning, the Douglas Fir Group (2016) recommended that researchers investigate language learning in the US today as it is situated within layered, interconnected and complex levels, that is, to understand the discourses that are produced across school actors (micro level) and within school environments (meso level) as well as how these discourses interact with larger societal discourses (macro level).

An ecological approach offers a suitable investigative frame for this kind of inquiry. Ecological approaches understand language, language users, and their environment— including discourses used to understand language— as a dynamically intertwined, complex system (Kramsch, 2002; Larsen-Freeman, 2002, 2011, 2013). Five features of this system— complexity; multiplicity; nonlinearity; hierarchies of organizational levels; and timescales— help illuminate the problem space and the data.

Complexity & Multiplicity. At the heart of an ecological perspective is the notion that systems—from bee colonies to classrooms—are complex, constituted by multiple agents and artifacts (Kramsch, 2002; Larsen-Freeman, 2002, 2013; Lemke, 2002); in the present study, the perspectives and discourses of teachers, students, parents, and administrators were considered.

Nonlinear Influence. The system also recognizes that a one-to-one cause-effect relationship among agents and artifacts cannot be presumed to exist; rather, it is the nonlinear relationality among these different agents and artifacts that characterizes the system (Kramsch, 2002, p. 16; Larsen-Freeman, 2013, p. 1); the way in which FL teaching and learning is ultimately understood by individuals, then, is not the direct result of the way in which a school or a nation defines it in policy documents, but rather how it is filtered through the interaction of a myriad of individual and systemic factors, such as a family's social background or a teacher's pedagogical training.

Hierarchy of Organizational Levels. An ecological approach also recognizes that there is a hierarchy of organizational levels and that higher levels impact lower ones (Kramsch, 2002; Lemke, 2002). In the current example, the discourses produced by participants were circumscribed within and impacted by a larger system—the local state, national, and international educational systems and policies.

Timescales. Finally, relationality and interaction across levels not only take place in the present, but also with reference to the past and in anticipation of the future—across different timescales (Kramsch, 2002; Lemke, 2002); the single school and the discourses that were used to understand the position of language study there were understandably influenced by past educational contexts and an attempt to anticipate what education, or the world itself, will be like in the future.

This framing provides the tools and orientations that are necessary to address the research questions:

1. What discourses do participants produce to understand FLs in U.S. K-8 education today?
2. How do these convergent and divergent discourses impact the school environment?
3. How do locally-produced discourses interact with larger societal discourses?

Methods

Context: The World First School

The case study took place at a private immersion school, The World First School (TWFS).³ Located in a large, densely-populated city in the Western United States,⁴ TWFS served approximately 200 students from the primary to junior high level. Classrooms were mixed-age, with team-teaching at primary and elementary levels and single teachers at the junior high level. TWFS aimed to educate internationally-minded students, situating a global perspective at the heart of its mission and vision statements. Linked to this international orientation was TWFS's language immersion program. At the primary level, either French or Spanish partial immersion was offered. At the elementary level, partial trilingual immersion was implemented in all elementary classrooms, with content instruction in French, Spanish, and English throughout each day. At the junior high level, the partial immersion model was replaced with English as the medium of instruction and second language classes (French and Spanish). Junior high students remained immersed in the language through year-long research projects conducted in both French and Spanish. This combination of an international orientation and a language immersion program made TWFS an ideal setting to explore the research questions.

Participants

Both the Head (Lisa) and Assistant Head (Rosa) of the school agreed to participate in the study. Data collection focused on one elementary classroom (grades 4-6) of 25 students and one junior high classroom (grades 7-8) of 5 students. These classrooms reflected the larger TWFS environment in several ways. First, these classrooms represented the two different language models: immersion (primary and elementary level) and second language classes (junior high level). Second, the two classrooms represented the school's history: two teachers (Sophie, Anaïs) had been at the school for over nine years while two others (Carlos, Ella) had joined the community within the past three years due to recent expansion efforts. The four teacher participants included the complete teaching team for the target elementary classroom— Anaïs (French), Carlos (Spanish), Ella (English)—and the only teacher for the target junior high classroom— Sophie (English). Carlos and Anaïs additionally taught the language-specific courses that were offered to the junior high students.

Following conversations with TWFS teachers and administrators, three parents out of 44 across the two target classrooms were selected based on several criteria: 1) long history at the school (more than five years each); 2) a child enrolled in a target classroom; and 3) family background that aligned with the two typical TWFS family profiles: multilingual families looking to immerse their children in heritage or non-heritage languages and monolingual English families looking to expose their children to additional languages. Christie, whose husband was Hispanophone, had a son enrolled in the target elementary classroom; Marco, whose wife was raised bilingually in Mandarin-English, had a child enrolled in both the target elementary classroom and the target junior high classroom; Melanie, who grew up in a monolingual English household, had three children enrolled in the target elementary classroom and one child in the target junior high classroom.

All students in the target classrooms were invited to participate in the study; 19 of the 25 elementary students and 3 of the 5 junior high students opted to participate. Their ages ranged from 10 to 14 years old. Following informal interaction with all student participants during observations and recommendations from teachers, two students enrolled in the target elementary classroom (Sara and Ilana, 11 years old) were selected to be formally interviewed based on two criteria: 1) representative of the pattern of responses gathered from other students on understandings of language; and 2) representative of two primary student profiles at the school: bilingual home environment (Sara, Spanish-English) and monolingual home environment (Ilana, English).

Instruments and Procedures

Data were collected both from participant observations and interviews so as to highlight and confirm themes that emerged from each individual data set and thus offer insight into the nuances and stability of the findings.

Participant observations. Participant observations took place between March and June 2015. A total of 35 hours were observed (elementary: 25 hours; junior high: 10 hours), producing field notes and analytic memos (90 pages) as well as audio/video recordings (29 total hours) that were transcribed for analysis. Observations took place one to two times per week and lasted between two and four hours per session. In consultation with teachers and administrators, a representative sample of classroom activities was selected for observation: at the elementary level, this included classes (math, science, French, Spanish, cooking); open work periods (unstructured time dedicated to project completion or as-needed meetings with teachers); and class meetings. At the junior high level, this included the French and Spanish language classes; open work periods; and research project presentation rehearsal. Several larger school events were also observed,

including a cultural presentation fair; a music concert; and graduation. Observations of all activities focused on topics, materials, and interactions as well as language use (amount, context, and purpose). In addition, the participant nature of the observations allowed the researcher to interact with different school actors during visits (Glesne, 2010; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Van Lier, 1988). For example, during open work periods, the researcher was able to strike up informal conversations with both teachers and students.

Interviews. The semi-structured interviews (Patton, 1990; Spradley, 1979) focused on participants' perceptions of the positioning of FLs in education today (see Appendix). The two administrators and three of the four teachers were interviewed at the beginning and end of the period under consideration. Due to scheduling and logistical conflicts, parents, students, and one teacher (Anaïs) were interviewed only once at the end of the observation period, with all interview questions being addressed during this final session. In addition, all four teachers were interviewed together in the middle of the observation period to learn about their collective views on interactions with the school administrators, fellow teachers, students, and parents. All but one interview was conducted in English (Anaïs, French). All interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through iterative rounds of inductive and deductive coding (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldaña, 2009). Inductive code creation began with broad-stroke themes (e.g., opportunity, learning) and, with each subsequent round of coding, codes were further parsed and refined, resulting in a list of discourse codes (e.g., cultural understanding, economic opportunity). These discourse codes were reviewed by two colleagues and further refined (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Deductive codes

included temporal and spatial scales (e.g., micro, meso, macro; past, present, future) as well as common discourses found in past literature (e.g., national security, equity). The application of codes to the data underwent inter-rater reliability procedures: the second coder, a graduate student with experience in qualitative data analysis, was first familiarized with the codebook (code name, description, and examples) and then asked to apply the codes to the data. There was a 90% match in code application between the author and the second coder. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

Results

Focal school participants produced multiple discourses to understand FLs in education today; five key themes—cultural understanding; cognitive development; globalization; economic opportunity; and relative importance—are discussed below.

Cultural Understanding

All of the adults mentioned cultural understanding, that is, the power of language learning to cultivate in learners a knowledge and appreciation of different countries, cultures, and peoples as well as to afford them a larger perspective on the world. The Head of School, Lisa, stated:

So, the practical [goal in language learning] is [students'] ability to express themselves in multiple languages. That they can actually, because of their knowledge, be able to really delve into and understand the cultures that speak these languages. But that the ultimate goal is for them to actually have a much wider, you know, perspective of the world and an acceptance, you know, of many different perspectives.

Similarly, the French teacher, Anaïs, described language learning in terms of cultural enrichment:

I know that it would be great to study a language or multiple foreign languages earlier to be able to see that there are other cultures, other ways of thinking and that difference enriches, in fact. Difference enriches your own culture.

For Marco, a parent at TWFS, language learning “just opens [you] up to the world” and highlights our “shared humanity.” Similarly, for Rosa, the Assistant Head of School, languages “broaden your education, your awareness of the world.” While developing cultural understanding was a central discourse among TWFS adults, student participants did not mention this topic, neither in interviews nor in observations.

While the school did not align itself with any particular framework or set of best practices in its teaching of culture (e.g., ACTFL’s 5Cs), efforts to cultivate cultural understanding were included in the school space. For instance, each year, the different elementary classrooms studied different regions of the world, exploring histories, geographies, foods, and art from different countries. The culmination of this year-long project was a school fair in which students presented country profiles to parents and community members. Students in Carlos’ junior high Spanish class also completed projects on aspects of Spanish-speaking cultures (e.g., famous Latin American soccer stars, Peruvian cuisine) while students in Anaïs’ junior high French class went to local French restaurants.

Extending beyond this traditional understanding of “big C” culture (Kramsch, 1993), teachers in both target classrooms also pointed out similarities during cultural explorations, such as the shared need to feed or express ourselves. That said, these efforts to identify underlying commonality in cultural practices and perspectives (ACTFL Standard 2.1), cultural products and perspectives (ACTFL Standard 2.2) or cultural comparisons (ACTFL Standard 4.2) (National Standards, 2015) did not always have an observable impact on students’ view of the world or of

their own culture(s): students still at times expressed an exoticized view of non-local cultures and practices, labeling them as “strange” or “weird.”

Cognitive Development

Another prominent discourse at TWFS situated language learning as a way to improve cognition, including cognitive capacity, cognitive flexibility, as well as improved awareness and knowledge of both the new and the native languages as a system (metalinguistics). The Head of School, Lisa, for example, mentioned that the “multilingual mind” was characterized by a “flexibility” that was difficult to attain through other means.

Both Ella and Carlos, the elementary English and Spanish teachers, mentioned problem-solving skills; Ella stated:

I think [learning language] also builds a little more resilience in the student. That they are able to problem solve in a different way. I think that they can look at the situation and go “this is what I need to do.” I think it also is about “I’m hitting a wall. How can I get past this wall? I want to say ‘apple.’ I don’t know the word. It’s a fruit. It has—it’s red, it’s crunchy. Trees.” You know and they’re learning how to describe and get kind of past it. I think that kind of resilience, having that in language, shows up in all the other subjects.

In addition to these enhanced work-around skills, Ella also noted the cross-linguistic fertilization that came with learning multiple languages, which Sophie, the junior high teacher, described as a “deep understanding of language.”

This cognitive development discourse was most salient among TWFS educators but rarer among parents and student participants at TWFS. Only one parent, Christie, brought up the cognitive benefits of language learning, mentioning briefly that “I think [language learning] is

just good for brain development, you know, some of, like the basic things. It makes you really agile.”

While no students explicitly mentioned cognitive benefits in interviews or participant observations, students in both classes certainly demonstrated several of them, including a fine-tuned awareness of language systems and semiotic resourcefulness. For example, during a chemistry lesson, eleven-year-old James searched for the word “yeast” in Spanish by systematically running through common noun endings in the language. Similarly, his classmate Ilana sought out a ruler to communicate the length of an object to a native French speaker who was unfamiliar with the U.S. measurement system. Moreover, while no teachers were observed to explicitly discuss the cognitive benefits of language learning with students, all teachers were observed making active connections between linguistic systems in their lessons as well as pushing students to draw on a range of semiotic resources. Ella, for instance, linked a botany lesson to Greek etymology while Carlos made links between words and terms in English and Spanish (e.g., person, *persona*; ball, *bola*; unit, *unidad*) in a mathematics lesson on division.

Globalization

Participants in all four groups mentioned globalization, although they developed the theme in different ways. Rosa, the Assistant Head of School, emphasized increased interconnections and social responsibilities:

Well I think [language is] their future. You know the world has shrunk. We're going to have to work all as one. To survive. You know, we are so many billion people in this world and natural resources are exhausting [sic]. So we need to work together to be able—and so they need to be able—to communicate and not only language itself, but

they need to be able to feel the interest in learning about the culture and the needs of the family in...the middle of Algeria.

Sophie, the junior high teacher, focused on the “special place” that languages occupied in a world marked by borders that “don’t mean the same thing” anymore, while Melanie, a TWFS parent, viewed language learning in the US in relation to international benchmarks:

I mean we are in a very—you know, outside of the United States, people learn way more than one language. We’ve lots of friends who have lived or are living outside of the US and you know, their kids are learning all sorts of, you know, languages in addition to Spanish and French.... I just think that is the way the world is. You know, here in the United States, we're really pretty ... uhm... cozy with our one language.

Similarly, two of the four TWFS teachers, Ella and Carlos, referenced the multilingual capacities of other regions, like Europe and Latin America, in rationalizing language learning in the US.

Interestingly, TWFS student participants also referenced the increased interconnection of the world today, although in a slightly different way: the benefits of language learning for global mobility or travel. Sara noted, for example, that “I think it’s just like, if you’re a person that really wants to go around the world, I think these three languages [are] something that you should probably know.” Ilana also pointed that, by learning languages, “then you can go to whatever country [where] they speak that.” Student perceptions of language learning in relation to travel may have been related to the organized trips undertaken by the school every few years. The summer prior to the observation period, several of the students in the target elementary and junior high classrooms had traveled to Asia for an international youth event. Several years prior to that, the school had organized a similar trip to France, and a trip to South America was

planned for the following summer. The other manifestations of the globalization thematic were not observed during participant observations.

Economic Opportunity

The economic advantages of language learning were also a theme developed by TWFS participants. Melanie, a parent at TWFS, saw language in relation to added benefits in the job market:

If we're going to embrace other cultures fully, it would help if we could know what other people are saying. And in the business world, and you know, wherever you go, I think it's very ... it just opens up more,... more worlds and more levels of understanding.

On the one hand, Melanie deployed here words and phrases associated with cultural understanding (embracing other cultures, understanding people and their cultures, and “opening up” more worlds and understanding); on the other hand, Melanie’s brief but important reference to the benefits of language/culture learning in “the business world” suggests opening new markets and brokering better, more efficient deals.

TWFS educators also pointed out the economic benefits of language learning, although less frequently than other rationales. Sophie, for example, noted how language learning—and specifically, the cultural understanding that comes with it—is “very, very important in work places nowadays.” Carlos and Rosa also touched on the economic opportunities of language learning, specifically mentioning increased job benefits and salary (Carlos) and the need to be prepared for a global economy (Rosa).

Students also brought up this theme. For example, Sara explained one of the reasons learning additional languages was important to her:

Well, maybe for like, kinda like, my brother ... he, he, he applied for like, a job, and the reason they chose him is because he knew Spanish so he could communicate with not just one person but with multiple people.

Similarly, Andy (11 years old), one of Sara's peer's in the elementary classroom, argued that learning French and Spanish could be very helpful "for certain careers." An indication of where Andy, Sara, and other TWFS students may have gotten the link between language and the economy came from one elementary student, Daniel (11 years old). In a cheeky rejoinder to a classmate's justification of language learning in terms of future jobs, Daniel added "at least that's what the teachers say." That said, no teacher was observed to evoke the relationship between language learning and economics across the observation period.

Relative Importance & the "Battle" Over Language

Despite the fact that most adult participants addressed the same themes, several of which were also mentioned by students, language learning was also a source of tension at TWFS. As the Spanish teacher Carlos described it, this "battle" began as students got older and when required content became harder, prompting parents to push to reduce, or even remove, the foreign language emphasis in the curriculum. Lisa, the Head of School, explained that:

Because for us, one of the biggest challenges is that, as the students get older, the parents start worrying that important quote unquote lessons be given in, ... in, ... —if [important lessons are] given in French and Spanish or Spanish, that [students] might not be able to fully understand. So there's a request that starts coming in about, for example, math being taught solely in English.

Similarly, Carlos noted that "Parents tend to, you know, get paranoid" when it comes to math and English; Lisa added that "alarms start going off [when students face academic challenges].

Particularly if you're dealing with math." For example, Christie, the parent of 11-year-old James, was vocal about her frustration with TWFS's insistence on a multilingual environment:

It's very hard for [James] to write. So we've asked them not to teach him ma[th]—force him to write in French, like ... Come on; we don't really care about it. Let's get some of the basic things.

Interestingly, for Christie, all languages were not deemed to be low priority subjects. While writing in French—and the French language, more generally—was less important to her, writing in Spanish— a heritage language for her son – was highly valued. Christie's contrasting valuation of French and Spanish and her work to have the school's multilingual curriculum removed underscore the differing perspectives of individuals and families concerning what constituted an "important" subject.

As a result of parental push-back, TWFS educators felt the need to "defend" language learning, explaining "the whys, why [language] is important" (Carlos) and its role in the curriculum, and insisting on a multilingual environment except in special circumstances, for example, in the case of a diagnosed learning difference. Students were also party to, and potentially influenced by, this tension. As Sophie noted, parents' pressure to have "important subjects" taught in English sent a "clear message to the child that the others [subjects] aren't important, so why should they bother with the French and the Spanish." Lisa confirmed that:

The kids pick up on [parental language preferences]. The kids pick up on that and so sometimes it's, ... you know, ... but they'll tell the teacher "my parent doesn't think that this language is very important."

While Lisa's observation suggests that some students could be influenced by their parents' perceptions of language, classroom observations pointed to different tensions: over the course of

the study, students expressed language preferences based on the perceived difficulty of the language and the teacher, rather than expressly linked to parental preferences. Similarly, challenges between students and teachers took the form of getting students—the majority of whom were most comfortable in English—to speak in and learn French and Spanish, rather than the relative importance of language learning in general.

Summary

In sum, the study investigated the ways in which various groups of respondents explained the role of foreign language learning in a K-8 setting. Interview and observational data highlighted participants' awareness of several benefits that were related specifically to language learning, including cognitive benefits, cultural understanding, and increased economic opportunity. Other discourses produced—e.g., globalization and relative importance—were not linked specifically to language but to larger understandings of education and the world today.

In terms of similarities and differences in points of view, TWFS parent and educator participants were often in agreement: all adult participants mentioned cultural understanding and most mentioned globalization. While noted by both parents and teachers, the relationship between language proficiency and economic opportunity was less salient among both groups, while the impact of language learning on cognitive development was more salient among educators. It is striking that none of the student participants suggested cultural understanding or cognitive development as positive benefits of language learning. In addition, TWFS parent and educator participants did not always agree on the relative importance of language learning and its position within a learner's total program of study. When considered within the larger, societal context, the emphasis on cultural understanding aligned with humanistic discourses, while mentions of economic opportunity and cognitive development aligned with instrumental

discourses. Globalization was also a salient motivation, and comparisons of U.S. educational priorities with those of other countries aligned with both humanistic and instrumental perspectives.

Discussion

The general alignment of views across adult participants at TWFS highlights some consistency within this school environment concerning the role and benefits of FLs in education. Consistencies may have been due to the school's clearly-stated and specific focus on internationalization, languages and interculturality, to the efforts of administrators and staff to inform parents of the school's priorities, and to the fact that parents had selected this particular private school and were likely to be, at least in part, in agreement with school's philosophy.

Alongside this consistency, however, a number of discrepancies were also observed. A first and central discrepancy juxtaposed the value of foreign languages with math and English. While FLs may have been seen by both TWFS parents and educators as a way to promote cognitive development, cultural understanding, and economic opportunity within a globalizing world, they were also seen *in relation to* other subjects and the larger educational undertaking: on the one hand, parents clearly supported language learning, as indicated by their choice of this particular private immersion school; that said, they did not always value language learning as an equally essential component of their child's program of study in comparison with math and English. This approach reflects the more wide-spread, traditional, and historically-rooted discourse of education as comprised of basics—numeracy and (monolingual) literacy—and enrichment activities, like foreign language learning. On the other hand, teachers and administrators held firmly to the equal value of foreign language learning in the school curriculum, reflecting and creating a deep divide between some parents and all of the educators.

While parental concern about student academic performance in immersion programs may not be new (Walker & Tedick, 2000), the case study highlights the impact of constituents' differing evaluations of FLs on the school environment, which resulted in this case in a tense and contested "battle." The case study exemplifies the fragile status of foreign language learning in the United States, even in a school that was self-selected by parents for their children.

A second discrepancy in the findings centered on the teaching, learning, and understanding of culture. Despite the significant emphasis on culture during the interviews with TWFS administrators, teachers, and parents, observational data illustrated difficulties in meaningfully and successfully incorporating culture into the language learning curriculum. While the school's mission statement and staff uniformly made reference to the importance of cultural learning and interculturality, thus aligning with Standards 2.1, 2.2, and 4.2 (National Standards, 2015), the cultural component of the curriculum did not consistently extend beyond the Four Fs (food, festivals, folklore, and facts) (Kramsch, 1991). Moreover, during interviews and observations, few learning opportunities addressed the interrelationships between cultural perspectives, products, and practices or students' relationships to their own and other cultures. Thus, despite on-going calls over the past two decades (Kramsch, 1993; MLA, 2007; National Standards, 2015) that the profession move from teaching isolated facts about another culture toward a sociological, participative, and intercultural approach to culture, this case study speaks to the larger and continued struggle to do so in American foreign language programs, particularly in K-5 immersion and dual-immersion programs as well as in Grade 6 – 8 regular classroom instruction and even in schools that place a high value on cultural understanding.

Another discrepancy reflected the nonlinearity of influence from adults to students, that is, student participants did not automatically take up their elders' articulated understandings of

the positioning of language learning. For example, both interview and observational data suggested that, while students were aware of tensions between parents and educators concerning the role of languages within the overall program of study, they did not always act on their parents' concerns. Observational data also suggested potential discrepancies between adults' understandings of language, as expressed in interviews, and the messages that were communicated to students. For instance, the cultural and cognitive benefits of language learning seem not to have been directly communicated to students by parents or teachers, while the relationship between language proficiency and economic opportunity and travel may have been more frequently or more easily shared with students, both in words (how language was framed for students) and in actions (school trips). The uptake of these two rationales by students may have also been due to students' developmental stage and their emphasis on more tangible rationales.

A fourth and final discrepancy links to scale, namely the move from the micro- and meso-levels to the macro-level. The data suggest that rationales that have been shared in broadly-distributed, past and current national policy reports were reflected in participants' understandings of foreign languages as a requirement for participation in the increasingly global community. However, not all prominent discourses of language learning were mentioned by TWFS participants, for example, the role of language proficiency in ensuring national security. Although this rationale is commonly cited in national policy documents and in applied linguistics literature (Kramsch, 2005; Perkins, 1980), it was not articulated by these participants, perhaps due to its reduced relevance to their daily choices and agendas. Similarly, economically-oriented rationales were not as commonly produced by TWFS adults as in macro-level discussions of language's importance today, perhaps because the school philosophy placed a high value on the

cultural and cognitive dimensions of language learning. It is possible, then, that this discourse was significant for participants but remained unvoiced.

Implications and Future Research

A first implication of this study relates to the importance of communication across groups in educational contexts. Increasing opportunities for conversation in schools would shed light on the different views on the role and importance of proficiency in one or more languages in addition to English and where those views come from, creating better understanding of the stances taken by individuals and groups. While communication might not resolve issues that stem from divergent understandings of the value of foreign language learning, it would work to support collaborative steps forward. Strategies for engaging in these kinds of conversations and for navigating the tensions that arise from divergent views should also become a topic in teacher preparation programs and professional development workshops.

A second implication is the need to think critically about how language learning is framed for students within educational spaces. While this study did not confirm a direct correlation between how parents, teachers, or schools framed language learning and students' beliefs, there is also no question that this framing matters, both for students themselves as well as for the future of foreign language education in the US. Language researchers and educators need to explore ways to frame foreign languages, both in words and in actions, not just as structured systems of verbs and nouns or as a resume builder, but also as sets of rich semiotic resources that are rooted in cultural practices, imaginations, and histories.

A third, related implication of the study is the need to make language learning more central in the U.S. educational system. While contemporary calls for increased attention to foreign language learning may abound, this is of little use if foreign language learning is still

seen as an option or a frill. Substantial and substantiated support for the wide range of personal, professional, and societal benefits of foreign language learning in the US is needed, following through on the recommendations given by different experts and expert organizations (e.g., American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2017; Jackson & Malone, 2009; Kroll & Dussias, 2017).

Since the case study research design used here does not lead to wide-scale generalizability, future inquiry into different views of language and their impact within a range of school settings would be essential. It would be important, for example, to explore different school levels and types in different parts of the country. TWFS represented a private, privileged K-8 environment located in a highly-diverse urban center that was committed to promoting an international outlook. Executing longitudinal studies that follow these students into the high school and beyond and studying the positioning of language learning in more urban and rural areas across small-, medium-, and large-sized schools and districts would inform our understanding of the interrelationships between individual, local, state, national and international perspectives. It would also be important to investigate the positioning of language learning using additional means and methods, such as through quantitative surveys and analyses.

Conclusion

This study investigated how the teaching and learning of FLs were understood within a single K-8 school across the individual (micro) and school (meso) levels as well as how those understandings interacted with larger societal (macro) perspectives. While participants' understandings of language were in part related to language specifically, both aligning with and differing from common discourses that have been shared in previous literature, these understandings were also related to conceptualizations of the world as a globalized place as well as to the place that language learning itself holds within American education more broadly.

Importantly, the study showed that a significant impact on the focal learning environment was not related to differences in what foreign languages were perceived to offer, but to differences in how foreign languages were valued. This underscores the need to continue to broaden the ecology in language research and practice so as to attend to the multiple factors and figures that influence how foreign languages are understood, thus advancing the ways in which foreign languages are taught, learned, and positioned in U.S. education and in relation to a global world.

Notes

1. While acknowledging the complexity and contested nature of definitions, this article will use the term “foreign language” to refer to the learning of non-English languages in the US.
2. This approximation reflects the current number of immersion programs that were registered in the Center for Applied Linguistics database at the time of publication.
3. All names are pseudonyms.
4. To preserve the anonymity of the focal school, a general region is indicated, rather than a specific city.

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Appendix

Survey Protocols

Adults

All

- What languages do you speak? How did you come to learn them?
- What has been the most important part about using/knowing multiple languages for you?
How has using/knowing multiple languages impacted you?
- What is the role of foreign languages in education today, in general, from your point of view?
- What is the role of foreign languages in the education provided here?
- When thinking about students, why do you think it's important or not important for students to learn a foreign language today?
- Why are French/Spanish/English important for students to learn today? What other languages would be important? Why?
- What languages do you use at home or at work? What languages do you use with students at the school?
- What are your goals for language use for you/your students?

Teachers

- How do you react usually when students ask you something in the "wrong" language?
- How do you deal with code switching (i.e., mostly Spanish/French but some English) in the classroom?
- What factors lead you to correcting form vs. focusing on communicative ability?

Teacher Group Interview

- What are quintessential narratives or experiences that encapsulate what it's like to learn and teach language at this school?
 - Probes: student reactions and interactions; parent reactions and interactions; school reactions and interactions; community reactions and interactions.

Students

- What languages do you speak? Where did you learn them?
- What do you like about learning another language?
- What does learning/knowing/using another language let you do?
- What is it like to learn language at this school?
- Do you think it's important to learn a foreign language today? Why/why not?