

Do Language Teachers Still Matter?

By Karen Rowan

Why is it so dangerous that under-funded language programs are firing teachers and replacing them with software programs? Are language software programs better than classroom teachers at teaching languages? And lastly, if this is not what's best for language students, what can we do as teachers to address this threat?

Fighting the biggest enemy

In a language classroom, if what is being presented is comprehensible and also compelling and also relevant to the students in the class because the topic of conversation is those students, we are meeting two ultimate goals. The first is that those students will acquire the language because their brains are engaged and paying attention to relevant information. The second is that when they finish this class, they will sign up for another one. After that, they will sign up for another one. Attrition is the enemy of language acquisition. Unless they are present, it doesn't matter how compelling or comprehensible or relevant the content is.

“Attrition is the enemy of language acquisition.”

There are no bilingual dinosaurs

A more engaging approach to language teaching and learning is crucial at this juncture. Without it, more and more language programs will be replaced by less-effective software programs. This is no longer an option for language teachers. We are essential to language education. We must proactively prevent our own extinction by capitalizing on what we can do that cannot be re-created by a computer. We must connect with our students in a way that fosters the development of the central goal of language education: communication.

Some current examples: In 2010, an elementary school in New Jersey saved \$200,000 by replacing three Spanish teachers with \$50,000 of Rosetta Stone.

http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2010/06/computer_programs_replace_fore.html

In 2012 in Eagle County Colorado, three Spanish teachers, including a twenty-one-year veteran teacher, were replaced by software.

http://www.denverpost.com/nationalpolitics/ci_20626608/foreign-language-teachers-replaced-by-software

To cut costs, colleges and universities eliminated world languages majors, particularly among less commonly taught languages.

<http://www.aaup.org/article/real-language-crisis#.URUzrFpU5Gg>

Should we have seen this coming? Should we have started adapting in 2002 when Drake University in Iowa eliminated its entire Foreign Language Department, letting all of its tenured and assistant professors go?

<http://www.questia.com/library/1G1-96237515/drake-university-eliminates-foreign-language-department>

Perhaps it's simply time to concede defeat and recognize that if software is effective in teaching languages, it may be the pathway to revitalizing and retaining those less commonly taught languages, creating Americans

who can speak Hindi and Farsi and Japanese. If what we care about is multi-lingualism and multi-culturalism, perhaps we should step out of the way and allow the technological wave of the future to provide comprehensible input to our students.

Here is the problem, though. It doesn't work (**See Krashen, IJFLT**). A tedious internet search on Rosetta Stone turns up research performed only by Rosetta Stone touting its effectiveness. In fact, ten years ago, I spoke directly with one of the two founding brothers of Rosetta Stone. He acknowledged that Blaine Ray had a better product in TPR Storytelling and that Fluency Fast was a better way to learn a language, but that Rosetta Stone had better marketing. One independent study on Rosetta Stone indicated that the majority of users don't actually use the product. In fact one study showed that only ten in 100 people will even finish the first ten hours of the software program. Only one person finished the first 100 hours.

No more fighting about methodology

This is not about a communicative approach. It is not about a Storytelling approach. I do not claim there is no place for technology in classroom language instruction. This is not exclusive to one method. All methods... every single one... must adapt immediately.

We cannot bury our heads in the sand. It is time for us to see ourselves as we are seen: expendable. Can a computer program teach grammar? Perhaps. Can a computer program teach vocabulary memorization? Perhaps. Can a computer program teach a student to negotiate and haggle over fruit prices and react appropriately when he realizes he has been saying "pay" instead of "buy" the entire time? Can it teach a student how to understand a crying tourist who has just been robbed and determine whether or not she is telling the truth? What do we bring to teaching that is unique? *Emotion*. In order to successfully teach languages the last thing we need to do is to try to be like a software program. Language teachers spend far too much time talking about methodology. We should be looking for the programs that have the same number of students in Level 4 as there were in Level 1 and emulating those programs. The rest of us are quite simply failing by all practical measures. It does not matter how good we are at teaching. It matters only how much our students can communicate in the language by the time the program ends.

Can you as an administrator, teacher or parent of a still-monolingual child look at the language program and see these problems?

1. The final level of language study in a program or school is significantly smaller than the first level of language study, (i.e. for every 100 students in Spanish 1, only 10 of them go on to take Spanish 4). There are multiple possible reasons for this effect, including a one- or two-year language requirement.
2. Students graduate from the program unable to communicate in another language, unable to travel safely, unable to read books in another language and unaware of the cultural aspects of communication in another language.
3. The program is entirely computer software or language lab-based.
4. Students are unenthused about the program and communicate that they find it to be dull and boring. They may also say they aren't learning anything.

If the future of language teaching is to include human teachers, we would be better served by collaborating at every level (department, district, state, national and international) to ensure our continued existence. If not, we may very well find our selves replaced by less-expensive language labs and monolingualism will be the inevitable fate of this generation of language students.