

Title: Sociolinguistics and Culture: Changing our Courses in a Changing World
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In a report from the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages published in May 2007, the authors state that “the standard configuration of university foreign language curricula, in which a two- or three-year language sequence feeds into a set of core courses primarily focused on canonical literature [...] represents a narrow model,” and that it “has outlived its usefulness and needs to evolve,” suggesting that we “enrich the foreign language major” with “courses in second language acquisition, applied linguistics, dialectology, sociolinguistics, history of the language, and discourse analysis” (Geisler, Kramsch, et al, 2-6). Russian’s status as a less commonly taught language (LCTL) coupled with the dominating point of view of the general U.S. population and media that, since the end of the Cold War, Russia has lost its geopolitical relevance complicates our status in higher education. Despite our best efforts and the government’s declaration of Russian as a “critical language” in 2006, we are still not safe from extinction. So, as the MLA suggests, if we are going to survive, we will need to adapt.

This paper will discuss how our undergraduate curricula can be modified to include courses in sociolinguistics. Courses that focus on sociolinguistics can bridge the gap between language and culture in a way that facilitates truly effective communication, but perhaps more importantly, shows students that true understanding of a language goes beyond grammar and memorization. Just as the understanding of how one literary text is influenced by an earlier text offers additional, crucial insight into the context upon which we can more deeply analyze literature, cultural knowledge provides this same contextualization for everyday usage of language. Pedagogical strategies for courses of this type will also be discussed.

Works Cited:

Geisler, Kramsch, et al., "Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World". Accessed 1 Mar 2008. <
http://www.mla.org/pdf/forlang_news_pdf.pdf>.