EDITORIAL

Why the Futures of Language Education Must Be Examined

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Why do you teach languages? If you ask a group of language teachers, the answers will often be future-oriented. We teach foreign languages to the students so that they can access opportunities, travel to other countries, participate in various communities and build lives beyond the present moment. However, in orienting language teaching toward the future, we rarely pause to contemplate on how specific images of the future come to shape what language teaching will become.

This first special issue of *Language Teaching Futures* provides a space to slow down and reflect on the interplay between human futures and language education. It proceeds from the recognition that futures are not neutral backdrops to pedagogical activities and educational practices, but powerful imaginaries that organize priorities, distribute values, identify desirable scenarios, and shape who language learners might become. At a moment marked by climate and geopolitical uncertainty, technological innovation, environmental crisis and linguistic inequality, futures involved in language learning and teaching matter more than any time before. Exploring those futures, critically, ethically, and imaginatively, is not speculative indulgence but a necessary and pedagogical task. This journal is founded to support that work.

One may ask "why do we need to examine the futures of language education?" Well, there are many convincing reasons. First, language is in fact a future investment and learning a language is routinely framed as a kind of human capital. People learn a language to secure a better job, better belonging, and better mobility. A futures and foresight look at language education can tell us what happens when (or if) learning a foreign language is a private investment and not a public good, or what might happen if we no longer future labour market as the final authority on the value of language education.

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Second, the decisions about which languages are learned, funded, or legitimized are always decisions informed by geopolitical futures. Narratives about globalization can make learning some languages necessary while some other not. Issues such as nationalism and migration can raise debates about whose languages should be taught and how they should be taught. This is also where futures studies intersect with the question of whose futures count. For language education, this matters because the field is constantly discussing what counts as global, modern, advanced, or successful communication.

Third, language teaching and learning is currently being reshaped by AI-mediated technology. Language learners, teachers, and researchers are talking about AI revolutionizing language education. In contrast, teachers are concerned about the futures of their job as they think AI may replace them. Some argue that with AI you may not need to learn a foreign language as machine translation and AI-mediated simultaneous interpretation will be available soon, while others contend that no matter how AI revolutionizes learning technology, it cannot provide the emotional advantages of face-to-face human interaction.

Some teachers are also hopeful that they no longer need to spend long hours preparing lesson plans, quizzes and activities, while some others worry that they are not ready for an AI-based language education era. What will the future of language education be? What is the future of this work? Do teachers need to develop a new kind of literacy for the future? Is this literacy related to AI and how to work with it or related to the future and how to prepare for it? There are many questions like this about how the field responds to these uncertainties. Responding to it with a utopian hype (i.e., language education will be revolutionized) might have several consequences for all parties, whereas responding with a defensive panic that languages, language teaching, and language learning might be pointless has its own immediate and long-term hazards. As Facer (2021) notes, future visions can coordinate present action and investment in powerful ways. Commercial issues may dominate the production of educational futures. This is exactly where exploring the futures of language education can help. Language education needs futures inquiry not only to react to technology and automation, but also to understand who takes advantage from particular edtech futures, what kinds of linguistic life they may make possible, and what forms of inequality they might intensify. Also, it can tell us about the literacies that teachers and learners might need to prepare for, and maybe survive in, the future.

Fourth, language education is tied to social futures. Language education shapes who can speak, be heard, and belong. It therefore exerts a noticeable impact on different futures of democracy, civic voice, social cohesion and workplace inclusion. Who gets full recognition linguistically? If multilingualism is treated as a problem to be managed and not as a resource, what kinds of futures about desirable citizens and communities would there be? A key benefit of future-oriented education is that it often emphasizes openness to alternatives and concerns for others as dimensions of future consciousness (Ahvenharju et al., 2018; Lalot et al., 2024).

Futures studies makes it possible to cultivate the ability to imagine other communicative worlds, other norms, other identities, other solidarities rather than merely training learners to comply with dominant ones.

Fifth, language education is one of the main sites wherein intergenerational ethics emerge. Issues such as heritage language maintenance, revitalization of languages, and language shift all depend upon how education mediates relationships between the past and the future (Gidley & Hampson, 2005). A futures-in-education viewpoint highlights the role of intergenerational responsibility and the hazards of projecting adults' anxieties onto children's futures. Adults may impose nostalgic futures and ask for preserving language as it was or propose instrumental futures and suggest that generations keep only what is useful. Futures studies helps hold a third space "living traditions can change without being erased." This field can help us develop the literacies that we need to properly imagine all possible futures, envision probable ones, and prepare the desirable and preferable futures, something which clearly influences the futures of this planet and all generations living on it.

The Benefits of Examining the Futures of Language Education

Doing futures and foresight research in the field of language education can have several advantages. The first benefit is that futures studies can help teachers and decision makers to understand the uncertainties associated with language teaching for the next 10, 15, or 20 years. Many teachers are uncertain about the fate of their career due to the emergence of AI and they fear that AI one day replaces them. On the other hand, stakeholders and owners of language institutes worry about the damages that AI can bring to their business. Futures and foresight research helps to understand these uncertainties better, identify possible futures, use the data to envision the more probable ones, and strive to achieve those desirable ones. Futures and foresight studies help us to prepare for the future of this profession, to understand the skills that might be needed for the future, and to develop the kinds of literacies that are needed in the future.

Another advantage of this methodological and epistemological view is that futures and foresight studies help to make the underlying assumptions we make visible. Futures studies is an analytical tool for exposing background assumptions that otherwise pass as common sense. As Chen and Hsu (2020) note, education carries the images of the future and failing to understand those images can do harm such as narrowing communicative aims to testable outputs, treating learners as future workers rather than present humans, or valuing certain accents, registers, and languages as "the future."

Studying the futures of language education expands the horizon of what can be imagined and legitimized as scholarly inquiry. Futures work is generative rather than predictive, inviting educators to approach the future not as a domain to be mapped and controlled but as a space

of radical possibility that can disrupt "business as usual" (Facer, 2021). In language education, this orientation opens room for imagining education as ecological practice, care and repair, democratic experimentation, multilingual flourishing, and intercultural solidarity rather than narrow competitive advantage. Crucially, it authorizes research questions that move beyond "what works?" toward "what could be otherwise?", treating such inquiry as academically rigorous rather than merely speculative.

The next benefit lies in foregrounding ethics and responsibility in language education research and policy. Futures scholarship emphasizes that imagined futures actively shape present decisions and therefore require ethical scrutiny, particularly regarding transparency, plurality, intergenerational justice, and the risks of speculative or extractive futures-making (Facer, 2021). Applied to language education, this perspective prompts critical questions about whose linguistic futures are being prioritized or marginalized, how colonial temporalities are reproduced through notions of "catching up," and whether learners are positioned as responsible for crises created by earlier generations. Framing futures inquiry in this way reinforces its role as responsible, critical scholarship rather than trend-following, strengthening the field's ethical and political reflexivity.

Finally, engagement with futures thinking can enhance learner and researcher agency by cultivating dispositions already central to language education, including imagination, perspective-taking, openness to alternatvies, and relational responsibility. Empirical work by Chen and Hsu (2020) identifies measurable dimensions of futures thinking such as transdisciplinary systems thinking and openness to alternatives and shows that students exposed to futures-oriented curricula score higher on several of these capacities. For language education, the alignment is particularly strong: the field routinely engages learners in alternative perspectives, narrative possibilities, and identity exploration. Futures inquiry deepens this work by explicitly linking language learning to the capacity to navigate uncertainty, imagine alternatives, and act collectively toward more just and liveable communicative futures.

Now that the needs for and the benefits of exploring the futures of language education have been outlined, *Language Teaching Futures* and its editorial team invite scholars, educators, and practitioners to join this collective work. We welcome research that critically, ethically, and imaginatively engages with the futures shaping language teaching and learning, the research that interrogates assumptions, explores alternatives, and attends to whose linguistic futures are being made possible or foreclosed. Through this journal, we aim to cultivate a shared space for futures inquiry that not only responds to uncertainty, but also contributes to the co-creation of more desirable and sutainable futures.

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