Employability Skills Enhanced by Language and Intercultural Competence

Increasing Graduates' Employability Through Language Proficiency AND Dual Degrees

By Le Anne Spino and Karen de Bruin

A student in the University of Rhode Island's International Studies and Diplomacy program, Johanna Leffler is majoring in French and International Studies.

Photo courtesy of Johanna Leffler
As language educators we understand that students exit our language classes with a host of valuable skills. They have increased proficiency in a second language, are better critical thinkers, have cross-cultural competency, and are ideally more compassionate human beings.

But how can students graduating from secondary and post-secondary institutions market their skills to potential employers? What can language programs do to increase the likelihood that graduates will secure the jobs for which they apply?

In our increasingly globalized world, the need for employees proficient in foreign languages is high. Nine out of ten employers rely on employees with foreign language skills and more than 50% of employers say that demand will increase over the next five years (ACTFL, 2019). Secondary and post-secondary institutions are in a unique position to help graduates meet that demand.

The Department of Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures at the University of Rhode Island (URI) is working strategically to make our graduates as competitive as possible. Two of our most successful strategies to-date have been to develop innovative dual degree programs and to increase students’ language proficiency through our Proficiency Initiative. These strategies have not only improved our students' employment prospects, they have also helped strengthen our program in general. At a time when postsecondary language programs are suffering from lower enrollments (Looney & Lusin, 2019), these strategies are particularly effective for maintaining the relevance and vitality of language programs.

Dual Degree Programs at URI

Students at URI may major in Chinese, French, German, Italian, Spanish, or Global Language and Area Studies with tracks in Arabic, Classics, and Japanese. The vast majority of our more than 750 language majors have dual majors, many participating in one of our Signature International Programs:

- International Engineering
- International Studies and Diplomacy
- International Business
- International Computer Science
- International Pharmaceutical Sciences
- Textiles, Fashion Merchandising, and Design (for French and Italian)
- Chinese Flagship

A closer look at how a few of these programs are structured illustrates why they make graduates more competitive.

For example, the International Engineering Program (IEP), founded in 1987, combines a B.S. in an engineering discipline and a B.A. in a language. IEP students generally study abroad for an entire year, which includes specialized engineering classes in the target language and a six-month paid internship abroad related to their field of engineering. Since only 5% of engineering students in the United States study abroad (Institute of International Education, 2019), the study abroad and international work experiences that all of our IEP students have provide them with a clear competitive edge in the global engineering market.

Programs like the IEP also ensure that students make progress in the five goal areas of the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages. Students:

- Learn to communicate effectively in the target language;
- Learn about cultural practices and products during their time abroad and at home;
- Make connections with other academic areas through specialized engineering-focused classes and internships;
- Make comparisons between different languages and cultures; and
- Participate in professional multilingual communities.

The progress toward these goal areas also increases our IEP students' employability following graduation. Speaking of how the IEP program prepared her both linguistically and culturally to be hired by the company Sensata, former IEP student Carmenis Cabrera ('05) states in an interview with Dr. Sigrid Berka, director of the URI IEP program: “Today’s business environment demands a global understanding of language and culture. I may be on the phone with Mexico, Holland, and China in one day! I’m part of an international team, and my ability to lead in another language allows me to do what I do well.”

Our newest Signature International Program is the International Studies and Diplomacy (ISD) program. Founded in 2018, it prepares graduates for jobs in international public service, diplomacy, and a multitude of other careers. In this program, students complete an International Studies major (comprised of courses in economics, political science, and other social sciences) and a language major. Additionally, they study abroad for at least one semester, participate in an economics course online with URI students in other countries while abroad, and complete a capstone course in which they demonstrate the culturally contextualized problem-solving, critical thinking, and systems-based thinking that they acquired while studying abroad in the target language.
One of the most unique requirements of the ISD program is that students must achieve at least Advanced-Low speaking proficiency according to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (ACTFL, 2012) on a certified ACTFL test. This requirement was inspired by our own very successful Chinese Flagship program, which routinely has undergraduate students with no prior knowledge of Chinese graduate with Superior level proficiency.

The proficiency benchmark for ISD students required a departmental shift across all languages to teaching towards proficiency, a shift that benefits not only ISD students (who must reach the benchmark to graduate) but also non-ISD language students. We have dubbed this shift in our department the “Proficiency Initiative.”

The URI Proficiency Initiative

All postsecondary programs try to ensure that graduates are proficient in the target language. However, taking a certain number of classes does not, in itself, ensure high language proficiency. In fact, the MLA has noted that “[f]our-year language majors often graduate with disappointingly low levels of linguistic ability” (2007, p. 242). If students graduate without the ability to effectively use the language that they studied, their employment prospects and potentially their job performance will suffer.

To ensure that our students could reach and sustain high levels of proficiency, we created the Proficiency Initiative at URI. This initiative includes a three-pronged strategy of proficiency testing, faculty training, and curricular revamping. These strategies allow us to help our students in the job market by providing them with an internationally recognized certificate of proficiency, closely monitoring their proficiency gains, and creating data-driven interventions to increase their proficiency. Similar initiatives are relatively common at the secondary level, especially with the advent of the Seal of Biliteracy. However, this type of initiative has been comparatively slow to percolate into postsecondary institutions.

We explain the benefits of each of the three strategies: testing, training, and curricular revamping, and then provide practical suggestions for implementing each of them. While our advice is generally geared toward postsecondary institutions, secondary schools should also be able to adapt and implement many of these suggestions.

Proficiency Testing

Measuring students’ proficiency using standardized proficiency tests is beneficial for students, faculty, and language programs in general for the following reasons:

• **Testing gives graduates a competitive edge.** Students who take standardized proficiency tests enter the job market with certified proof of their linguistic ability. These certifications are particularly useful for graduates of dual degree programs, since their proficiency level as listed on their résumé may well be the “tie breaker” between them and otherwise equally qualified candidates.

• **Testing provides positive washback.** Consistent proficiency testing is a clear reminder to students of the importance of developing their own language proficiency. It also motivates faculty to deepen their knowledge of proficiency-oriented instruction and modify courses accordingly.

• **Testing helps students and faculty track progress towards goals.** Students and faculty are able to gauge students’ linguistic ability through test results. If students are tested more than once during their studies, it is also possible to track the progress of individual students over time.

• **Testing improves language instruction and advising.** At the program level, testing allows faculty to determine if students are generally meeting the proficiency benchmarks and, if they are not, to make evidence-driven modifications to courses. Testing also helps instructors differentiate instruction and create assignments specifically designed for students of varying proficiency levels. Finally, testing helps faculty properly advise students and make targeted and purposeful interventions if students score below proficiency benchmarks.

Considerations that programs should take into account before implementing testing include:

• **Determine which test to use.** ACTFL offers assessments to measure language proficiency in all four skills, and all assessments can be rated on the ACTFL, ILR, or CEFR scales. These tests are used not only in academia, but also by the U.S. government and by many corporations, and their reliability has been extensively investigated. At URI, we consistently test students using the Oral Proficiency Interview–Computer (OPIc) and the ACTFL Latin Interpretive Reading Assessment (ALIRA). However, we have also used the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), the ACTFL Listening Proficiency Test, and the ACTFL Reading Proficiency Test. We receive our ratings using the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines.

• **Determine when students will be tested.** Since having a certificate of proficiency is useful in the job market, students should be tested close to graduation. However, testing students more than once during their studies is also very beneficial. At URI, students are tested at least twice: once in “bottleneck” courses (i.e., courses that all language majors pass through, generally around the fifth semester of study for those who start their studies with the first class of the language sequence), and again the semester before graduation. Instructors teaching courses in which proficiency testing is slated to occur dedicate class time or final exam time to proctor the proficiency testing. We also...
administer surveys to the students at this time to collect more data that could be useful in revamping our programs.

- **Explore how the tests will be funded.** There are various options for funding proficiency tests. Students can order and pay for their own tests directly or departments/institutions can foot the bill through grants or donations. At URI, students are assessed a course fee for every language class they take. These fees are used to pay for services that directly benefit the students, such as tutors, conversation partners, copies, and proficiency testing. This funding structure ensures that URI is able to consistently support iterative testing.

**Faculty Training**

It is critical that faculty fully understand what language proficiency is, how it develops, and how it can be measured. A deep understanding of these matters helps faculty understand their students’ test scores; revamp their courses to make them more proficiency-oriented; increase vertical and horizontal articulation across classes; understand what it takes to reach specific proficiency benchmarks; and share a common “language” when discussing course and program goals.

It is important to stress that faculty members who specialize in both linguistics and literature benefit from this type of training, as it allows all instructors to understand what proficiency level students are at, and what language functions they need to work on to reach the next sublevel. This information is especially useful in literature courses, as it helps faculty select readings that are appropriate for their students’ proficiency levels, and then structure class activities strategically so that students can engage in discussions about the text that are at or slightly above their current proficiency level. This allows both faculty and students to engage in the maximum amount of discussion allowed by the proficiency levels of students.

Some suggestions on how departments can go about increasing their knowledge of proficiency-oriented instruction include:

- **Hire experts.** Given the documented paucity of language experts in language departments (VanPatten, 2015), perhaps the most effective way for departments to gain knowledge about proficiency-oriented instruction is to hire faculty with expertise in the area. For example, at URI we created a tenure-track position for a Proficiency Coordinator with a specialization in second language acquisition to organize our Proficiency Initiative. We are tying all of our future hires to goals related to the Proficiency Initiative and a concurrent initiative to develop our students’ intercultural communicative competence. This strategy not only increases our department’s knowledge base, it also demonstrates unity across language programs to the upper administration, facilitating the approval of new faculty lines.

- **Attend ACTFL workshops.** ACTFL provides a host of professional development workshops. At URI, all full-time faculty members have attended a four-day OPI Assessment Workshop, and many faculty members are pursuing full certification as certified OPI Testers. We have also hosted many other ACTFL professional development workshops on proficiency-oriented instruction.

- **Make investments.** Faculty or departments can also invest in a variety of educational resources such as conferences, books, or online modules. At URI, we have purchased a library of books for faculty about proficiency-oriented instruction and we have invested in many of ACTFL’s Virtual Learning Modules. We have also brought experts to URI to share their knowledge. For example, in Fall 2018 we invited Dr. Erwin Tschirner, one of the contributing authors of the 2012 *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines*, to join us for a semester as a Max Kade Distinguished Scholar.

**Curricular Revamping**

Once faculty are equipped with data from proficiency testing and knowledge about the measurement and development of proficiency, they are ready to begin to look critically at their curricula. Faculty should keep in mind that because class time is so limited, it is difficult for students to reach advanced proficiency in a four-year program (Rifkin, 2003). Therefore, every component of students’ language learning experiences must be critically analyzed and optimized. Considerations faculty should keep in mind when making curricular decisions include:

- **Create clear objectives for your program and revamp classes strategically.** This step is extremely time-intensive but is perhaps the most crucial step of all. At URI, we are in the beginning phases of curricular redesign. Bernhardt, Valdés and Miano
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(2009) provide a detailed description of how Standards-based curricular reform can take place in a program that also engages extensively in proficiency training.

- Give students explicit instruction about the development of language proficiency. Given the time constraints of the classroom, students need to spend time interacting in the target language outside of class to reach advanced proficiency levels. To that end, it is helpful if students understand the basics of how language is acquired. At URI, we are currently preparing online modules to help educate students in this regard.

- Promote and improve language learning experiences outside the classroom. Peer- and community-based programs can be a useful way to provide students with opportunities to interact in the target language outside the classroom. Studying abroad can also be an effective tool to increase language proficiency but studying abroad itself is not a guarantee that students will make proficiency gains. Intercultural communicative competence plays a significant role in the building of proficiency while abroad, so programs are well advised to incorporate intercultural communicative competence-building into their proficiency curricula. Programs should also carefully select partner institutions to ensure maximum student exposure to the target language while abroad. Finally, students should be encouraged to go abroad on their own and should be trained explicitly on what they must do while abroad to increase both their intercultural communicative competence and their proficiency.

- Get student feedback. As you make curricular changes, survey your students to determine what you are doing well and what could be improved upon. We currently use large-scale, online surveys to do this but focus groups and student interviews would also work.

- Ensure correct initial placement. Correct placement is critical to ensure that students receive the maximum benefit from their classes. One option for placement testing in a proficiency-oriented program is the new ACTFL Proficiency Placement Test (APPT), a listening and reading proficiency test that delivers ratings according to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines.

- Assess the results of your curricular revamping. While we are not yet at the stage of being able to assess our curricular revamping to show desired results, we anticipate using the biannual programmatic review process in place for all programs at our university to compare measured proficiency levels to desired levels, which will then allow us to make adjustments.

URIs dual degree programs and the Proficiency Initiative may seem challenging to implement because of the high levels of collaboration required by multiple stakeholders. In fact, without the support of the upper administration, buy-in from faculty from other programs, and the commitment to cross-departmental teamwork by all languages faculty, innovations like these cannot thrive. These programs are successful because stakeholders across the board share a common goal: to increase the employability prospects of our students.

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References


