

# World-Readiness as Career Readiness

*Amanda Lanier* considers attracting investment in language learning through interdisciplinary approaches



**W**orld language enrollments are declining and technology is advancing faster than we can imagine. How can we keep attracting investment in language learning and teaching?

### Threats and Opportunities for Language Learning... The End Is Not in Sight

In the year that I was born, coincidentally, Douglas Adams introduced the world to a very useful little creature called the Babel fish. This “cyborganism” would live in your ear, feed on your brain waves, and allow you to interpret every language you encountered. The original Babel fish was fictional, but it inspired the name of the first free online translator. Announcing the launch of Altavista’s machine translation interface in 1997, one author clearly imagined replicating the Babel fish’s miraculous effects: “Voilà!—you’re multilingual. No more need for flash cards, language labs, or grammar books. Just plug and play the fish” (<https://web.archive.org/web/19990427232555/http://www.infotektur.com/demos/babelfish/en.html>). Considering that we did not start carrying around devices in our pockets that could access this translator for at least another decade, Altavista’s machine transla-

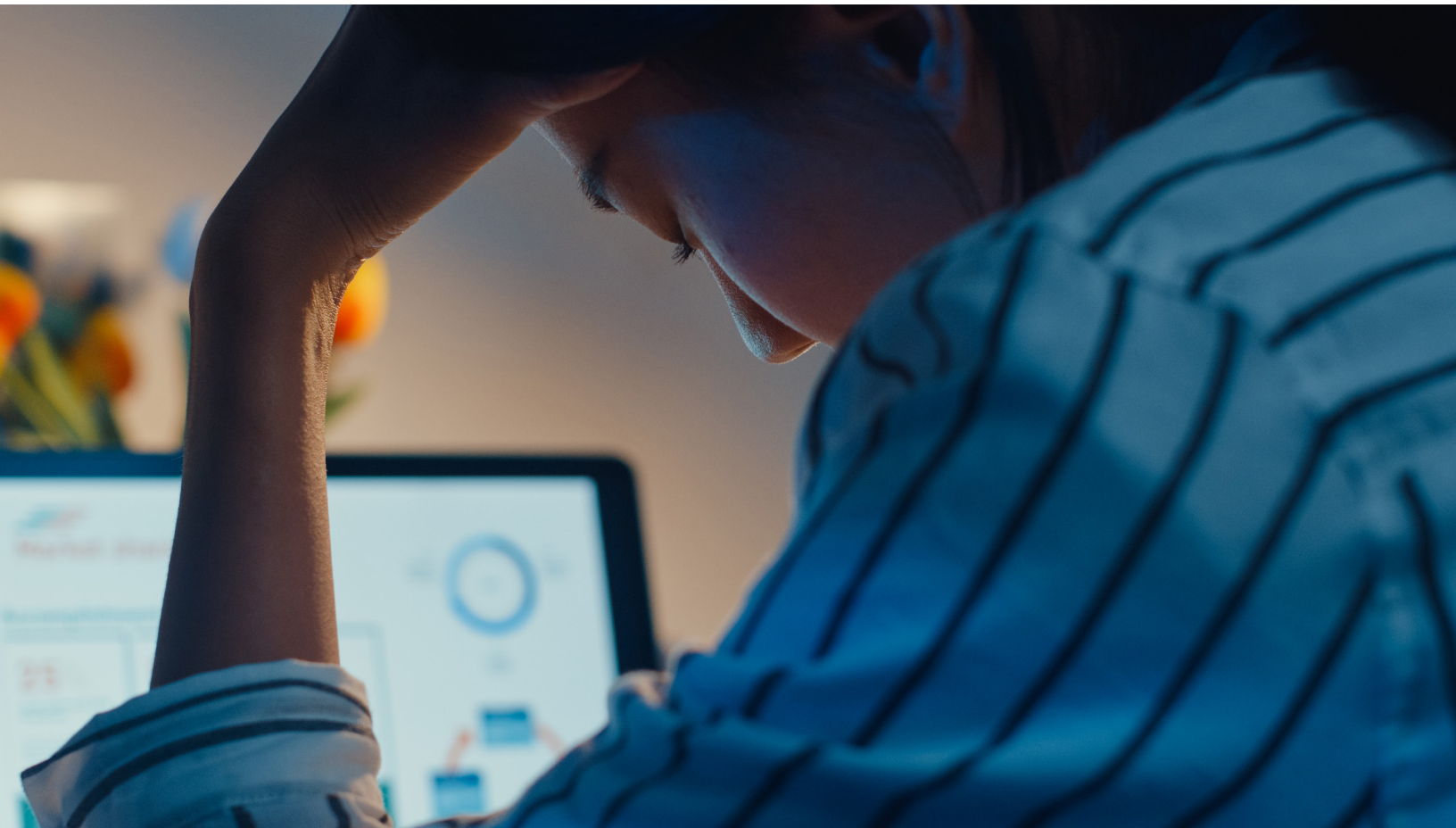
tion was groundbreaking but no threat to the language-learning industry.

Fast-forward to March 2024, however, when a headline in the *Atlantic* suggested a much more ominous effect of new technology: nothing less than “The End of Foreign Language Education” ([www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2024/03/generative-ai-translation-education/677883](http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2024/03/generative-ai-translation-education/677883)). In the article, Matsakis (2024) describes watching herself speak Chinese fluently in a video created with an app called HeyGen, though her actual proficiency was intermediate at best. Driven by generative artificial intelligence, apps like HeyGen operate on a plane of technological existence far more advanced than Altavista’s BabelFish, but Matsakis is duly troubled by the possibilities for mistranslation and also deepfakes. Matsakis goes on to praise the virtues of skilled human interpreters, but what about language learning? Could this technology make it unnecessary? Is the end in sight?

Not in my view. Oh, I have happily explored the power of my preferred AI assistant, Claude ([www.anthropic.com/claude](http://www.anthropic.com/claude)), to translate various texts to and from a dozen languages. Claude will even rewrite a passage in the style of a space pirate if you

so desire. As Matsakis also argues, though, relying on an automated interpreter will not replace the wide range of knowledge and skills that develop through language learning.

I doubt that anyone who works in the field of foreign language education today feels that the field is entirely stable, but the advances in translation technology are far from the greatest threats to language learning in the US. The story of West Virginia University shutting down its Department of World Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics and most of its language courses last year worries me far more, not least because the president who instigated this move seemed so confident that students who still wanted to learn a language could just replace their eliminated instructors with a language-learning app ([www.languagemagazine.com/2023/08/15/wvu-announces-plan-to-dissolve-entire-department-of-world-languages-literatures-and-linguistics](http://www.languagemagazine.com/2023/08/15/wvu-announces-plan-to-dissolve-entire-department-of-world-languages-literatures-and-linguistics)). The Modern Language Association (MLA) and the American Association of Applied Linguistics (AAAL) have both recognized Dr. Amy Thompson, chair of the now-closed department, for her efforts to prevent the closures, but the administrators and trustees of WVU remained





convinced that other fields should take priority in the university's rescued budget.

### **Weak Investment and Low Enrollments... Which Comes First?**

The WVU administration justified their choice to stop investing in language learning by pointing to decreases in enrollment, and unfortunately WVU is far from alone in that trend. The most recent MLA report states that the number of students taking a language course is less than 7% of the total enrolled in colleges and universities, and that enrollments have dropped nearly 30% since their peak in 2009. In US primary and secondary schools, only 20% of children are studying a language other than English. In developed countries across the world other than the US, an average of 88% of 15-year-olds are studying an additional language in school (OECD, 2020), even when that average includes the lower proportions in other English-speaking countries like Australia and New Zealand. Most of those students also begin learning additional languages much younger than our children do in the US.

Clearly, US institutions are not investing in language learning to the same extent as other countries, but should we conclude that low enrollments mean that demand for language learning is low? That language learning is unnecessary? That these programs and the instructors teaching in them are not making valuable contributions to their students' preparation for the world beyond graduation?

The percentage of students in higher education enrolled in an additional language may sound small, but that 7% encompasses about 1.2 million students, at 2,455 institutions, in nearly 11,000 language programs, studying 258 different languages. The downturn in 2009 that began the recent 30% decline coincided with a drastic drop in government funding for language-related initiatives in higher education. In the twelve years since those cuts, appropriations not only have remained much lower but have barely increased enough to match inflation. In the K-12 domain, there is only one federal grant for starting and growing world language programs, and most elementary and middle school students are not studying a language because it is not offered in their school or even their district. Why is it easier to believe that low numbers mean low interest and low value than to recognize how difficult it is for learners to access stable and effective language-learning opportunities?

### **Strengthening Language Teachers in Times of Crisis**

For ten semesters over the last five years, I have taught a course in World Language Program Development and Administration to graduate students who are almost all currently working as language teachers, with experience ranging from a couple of years to multiple decades, in settings that include K-12, higher ed, military and diplomatic service programs, and community schools, in many different US states and several other countries. Each semester, I have asked the same question in the first discussion prompt of the first module: Is the field of language teaching in crisis?

In ten semesters, none of my students has ever said no. They never respond that they think the field is doing just fine. In fact, they say that they "strongly" and "definitely" and "absolutely" believe that the field is in crisis. The assigned readings that precede this discussion do not tell them that there is a crisis. They read *America's Languages: Investing in Language Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, a 2017 report that only exists because members of Congress tasked the American Academy of Arts and Sciences with investigating ways to increase multilingual capacity in the US. The report begins by stating that "there is an emerging consensus among leaders in business and politics, teachers, scientists, and community members that proficiency in English is not sufficient to meet the nation's needs in a shrinking world, nor the needs of individual citizens who interact with other peoples and cultures more than at any other time in history" (p. viii). The report goes on to say that communicative competence in languages other than English is "critical to success in business, research, and international relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century."

This "growing consensus" does not seem to extend as far as the programs in which these teacher-learners work. As one of them stated, "I think the biggest challenge... is the lack of prestige and importance given to the field. Foreign languages are not deemed as important as other subjects, especially math and science. I think if society as a whole were to look at foreign language as a tool that can help students succeed in any career field, then I think it would gain some prestige." Across all of these teacher-learners' responses, their personal experiences and the strategies that might turn things around vary, but the evidence of a crisis is almost always the same: the lack of support

for language learning and language teachers from the many stakeholders who influence their students and their programs.

They believe that gains in prestige would encourage the kind of investment that would allow them to receive sufficient resources, including better curriculum materials and specialized training so that teachers can develop and improve their skills. Perhaps more importantly, their learners would not be surrounded by influences that cut into their motivation and constrain their options to continue their language learning beyond the minimum requirements. As a teacher in Virginia put it this year, "many language programs at a school and district level are continually put on the back burner and treated like the red-headed stepchild of the family unit, which further damages our potential to grow and support our learners."

The effect on a hard-working teacher who is passionate about languages and language learning but faces disregard can be devastating, especially when they also face extra demands and limited resources relative to other subject areas. A Spanish teacher in California admitted in his response last year that "I often wrestle with the question of how long I intend to stay in the field myself... Considering my passion and true belief in its transformative capabilities, this, at least personally, speaks to how sad it is to see how deeply the crisis runs."

### **Building a Vision of Language Proficiency as Career Readiness**

As of next semester, I have decided to stop asking my graduate students if they think the crisis is real. Changing the discussion prompt will not protect them from the challenges of rapidly changing technology or budgetary decisions that are made far above their heads, but it will stop emphasizing threats when we need to focus on opportunities. They are not the audience that needs to be convinced to invest in language learning in order to build multilingual capacity in the US workforce. Together, though, we can build a vision of the benefits of language learning that may convince other stakeholders to increase support for our efforts and for our learners.

Here is the problem: We are very good at making arguments about the value of language learning that appeal to others who think just like us. For those of us who have devoted our lives and careers to language education, we are well aware of the "transformative capabilities" of language learning.



We revel in linguistic complexities, we recall the sense of discovery and freedom that language learning has brought us, and we have been rewarded time and again when we have succeeded in breaking language barriers and bridging cultural divides. We want to believe that our passion is contagious, as long as our energy holds out. If we are very fortunate and convincing, a few of the 7% of students who are studying languages will have the audacity to follow us down the paths we have chosen, into degrees in language, literature, linguistics, or language teaching.

We are also remarkably bad at framing arguments that align with the priorities of people who do not value multilingualism like we do. Language learning ought to enhance our perspective-shifting skills more than that! Our language learners, their parents, teachers in other subject areas, administrators and supervisors, policymakers, and others may appreciate our enthusiasm but nevertheless choose to allocate their limited resources to other priorities. One of our MSU administrators recently stood up in a room full of faculty in humanities fields and announced quite frankly that he believes “the humanities are vulnerable.” He is an economist, he reminded us, specifically a competition economist, and as such he believes that our fields have to compete with more vocationally specific fields across campus.

We give in to that supposed vulnera-

bility when we frame our arguments for the wrong audience and the wrong arguments for the audience we need to target. The current generation of students moving from high school to higher education is particularly concerned with return on investment. According to Deloitte’s *2024 Higher Education Trends*, they want “a compelling value proposition” to justify the expense of earning their degrees. However, they also know that they are inheriting a world of “wicked” problems that make it impossible to predict all the skills they will need in their careers. Problems like political unrest, environmental crises, aging populations, and relentless technological change will require ingenuity, adaptability, interdisciplinary collaboration, and international cooperation.

In this context, career readiness does not simply mean the ability to get a job right after graduating from college (though that is the metric that MSU Career Services uses to compare outcomes for various majors). It also does not mean preparation for a specific, highly predictable job that will remain largely the same for the next 30 years. Predictions about the future of work consistently state that today’s graduates should be prepared for innovations and challenges that we cannot begin to foresee. That preparation should develop versatile, flexible, and self-directed graduates who will be able to operate in a range of contexts and teams and manage their own lifelong learning.

Global and local economies will need graduates entering the labor market who are able to support and promote international collaboration, for business purposes and to solve challenges that span national borders. To get our students there without language learning is possible, but well-designed language programs that emphasize world readiness and intercultural competence can make a very valuable contribution by preparing our graduates to negotiate linguistic and cultural boundaries wherever they encounter them, locally and abroad. The argument that language learning is essential might not hold water, but arguing that there is no benefit for your career prospects if you do study an additional language? That language proficiency will not open doors you want to walk through? Nonsense.

According to the 2019 IPSOS report *Making Languages Our Business* ([www.languageconnectsfoundation.org/programs-initiatives/research/making-languages-our-business](http://www.languageconnectsfoundation.org/programs-initiatives/research/making-languages-our-business)), nearly 90% of employers in a broad range of industries, including construction, manufacturing, hospitality, travel, health care, education, and trade, who participated in their survey rely “some” or “a lot” on employees with multilingual skills, and over 50% of those employers expected their need for those skills would go up in the future. All branches of the US Armed Forces and the State Department offer incentive pay for foreign language proficiency that can add \$1,200 to \$12,000 per year, and they do not require mastery of the target language. Particularly for languages that are on the Strategic Language List, bonuses can begin at Level 1 or 1+ on the Interagency Language Roundtable scale, approximately equivalent to intermediate-mid on the ACTFL scale.

At that level, which is not an unreasonable expectation for high school students participating in a well-structured program, the language user can “satisfy most travel and accommodation needs and a limited range of social demands beyond exchange of skeletal biographic information,” but grammatical accuracy in “basic” features of the language is “evident, although not consistent.” In fact, high school students across the US can earn the Seal of Biliteracy if they demonstrate intermediate-mid or intermediate-high (depending on the state) proficiency in English and an additional language, either their target language or a heritage language that they began learning in their home. Colleges and universities are increasingly likely to award course credits to incoming students

who have earned the SoBL, and they may also award credits for lower levels of proficiency that are documented with the same widely recognized assessments.

In addition to that explicit demand and reward for language proficiency, communicative language teaching can develop all eight of the Career-Readiness Competencies established by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) (<https://naceweb.org/career-readiness/competencies>): communication, critical thinking, equity and inclusion, leadership, professionalism, teamwork, technology, and career and self-development.

Not all programs will cultivate these skills equally well, but task-based and project-based methods inherently involve collaborative activities that require teamwork and critical thinking, widely used standards ask learners to express themselves appropriately in written and spoken modalities, and many language teachers also use a variety of technology, incorporate culturally sustaining pedagogy, and guide learners to self-evaluate as they progress along their language-learning journeys.

Given that many stakeholders believe that STEM fields should be prioritized over language learning, it is particularly intriguing that 95.5% of employers contributing to the NACE 2024 Job Outlook said that communication was the most important of the eight Career-Readiness Competencies, but only 55.2% rated students as very or extremely proficient in communication, almost 25% lower than students' ratings of themselves. As for technology, over 80% of employers thought that students were very or extremely proficient. If 80% said that their potential employees' technology skills seemed more than sufficient while nearly half had only passable communication skills, why would we steer students away from courses that would specialize in communication and also often incorporate technology?

### Better World-Readiness Outcomes and Stronger World-Readiness Messages

These findings certainly can add some weight to your tool kit when you are communicating with learners, parents, and other audiences about the potential benefits of language learning. Teaching a world language effectively offers a whole ring of keys that will open doors to valuable and important opportunities. No matter how important these competencies are to employers, they will not automatically improve career pro-

spects for language learners unless learners are successful in developing and documenting their language proficiency and the other career-readiness competencies that they may have developed in their language courses. The most recent report from the MLA on language-program enrollments includes a series of recommendations based on departments that have had stable or increasing numbers in recent years: "Departments find that they improve their chances of success if they actively seek collaborations internally and externally, revise their programs to attract interest and meet student needs, and celebrate student success with scholarships, awards, and social events" (Lusin et al., 2023, p. 3).

For language programs in K–12, higher education, and other settings that want to improve their messaging about the direct and transferable benefits of language study and also strengthen career-readiness outcomes for their learners, here are a few specific recommendations:


#### 1. Manage your messages to various audiences of stakeholders in your learners' futures.

This recommendation involves reviewing and adding to the vision for language learning as career readiness offered in this article and conveying it to the audiences that need to hear it in your context. These interactions can be incidental, but you can also incorporate your messaging into handouts, newsletters (your own and any published by your school), and social media posts. Invite parents and administrators into your classroom. Incorporate career-readiness content and

tasks into your existing curriculum, and consider ways that your learners can generate their own means of conveying these messages to others through posters, videos, presentations, debates, showcases, or pitch sessions. Use the target language as much as possible, but these initiatives can be a valuable use of the 10% that remains when you aim for 90% target language use in the classroom.

#### 2. Promote communicative methods and assess proficiency regularly.

Implement, or continue to implement, standardized assessments of proficiency. To reach the learning targets set by the Seal of Biliteracy within a few years, your entire curriculum will need to emphasize meaningful communication in all modalities, rather than memorization of vocabulary and unrealistic accuracy in grammatical forms that learners will rarely encounter. Regular assessment and thoughtful feedback on learners' performance each time they are assessed will help to normalize assessment, allow



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### 3. Consciously incorporate intercultural competence and global competence objectives.

Teaching global competence effectively can be a natural outflow of teaching for intercultural competence along with proficiency, particularly if you follow task-based and content-based frameworks in which the tasks and content align with other subject areas. The OECD (2020) defines global competence as “a multi-dimensional capacity that encompasses the ability to:

- “examine issues of local, global, and cultural significance;
- “understand and appreciate the perspectives and worldviews of others;
- “engage in open, appropriate, and effective interactions across cultures; and
- “take action for collective well-being and sustainable development” (p. 55).

You can discuss the concepts of global competence while maintaining a high proportion of target language use by downloading the versions of the OECD global competence materials in your target language, using a generative AI assistant to create simpler versions of the text or further translations, and even asking the AI assistant to suggest relevant linguistic features and activities.

#### Use Interdisciplinary Approaches to Connect across the Curriculum

Interdisciplinary approaches help to illuminate the applicability of your course content and the skills learned in your classroom to other contexts. Many programs are now doing this by using the Sustainable Development Goals as themes that correspond to content traditionally included in a language curriculum and also highlight connections with other fields. In K–12 and higher ed, approaches based on language for specific purposes involve creating courses and programs that include objectives for language development as well as objectives related to the relevant content, which can align with health care, business, hospitality, construction, or other vocational fields.

Interdisciplinary initiatives, including courses, can also strengthen connections be-



tween language learning and internationally oriented projects, research, etc. Gradually seek out collaborations with other units and initiatives that already stand to benefit from language learning and intercultural competence, including education abroad, internships, and research partnerships.

Also, articulate and enhance the benefits of language learning beyond proficiency, including intercultural competence and a variety of soft skills that are valued by employers, as well as digital literacy, marketing skills, etc. Microcredentialing and other strategies that assess and demonstrate the skills that language learners are gaining will help to convey the return on investment in terms that are easily recognized and valued by other stakeholders.


#### Invest in Language Teacher Development So That They Can Lead These Initiatives

The last recommendation is the most important: greater investment in language teacher development, including courses that explicitly address broadly defined skills of leadership and advocacy, will equip them to carry out these initiatives in ways that align with their own values, skills, learners, and existing resources. Language teachers should not expect themselves to implement these initiatives alone, and administrations should not expect teachers they supervise to implement curriculum changes or outreach initiatives without allocating time and resources. Collaborate and adapt others' materials whenever possible.

Advocating for your program and emphasizing its career-readiness benefits

does not have to mean a huge amount of additional work or engaging in politics, in the sense of internal school power struggles or of the US legislative process. Many of the strategies above are steps that the teacher can implement, largely without broader support or collaboration. However, broader support and collaboration will make those steps far more feasible.

An important message for teachers is that change may be necessary, but first you should celebrate what your program is already doing in terms of meaningful and purposeful preparation for the “real world.” You can improve your practices, and you can make your program more visible to others, but in so doing you are entirely justified in holding back and resisting change if it means that you then have bandwidth to pay attention to what is important for the sustainability and growth of your program. All the best to you in these efforts!

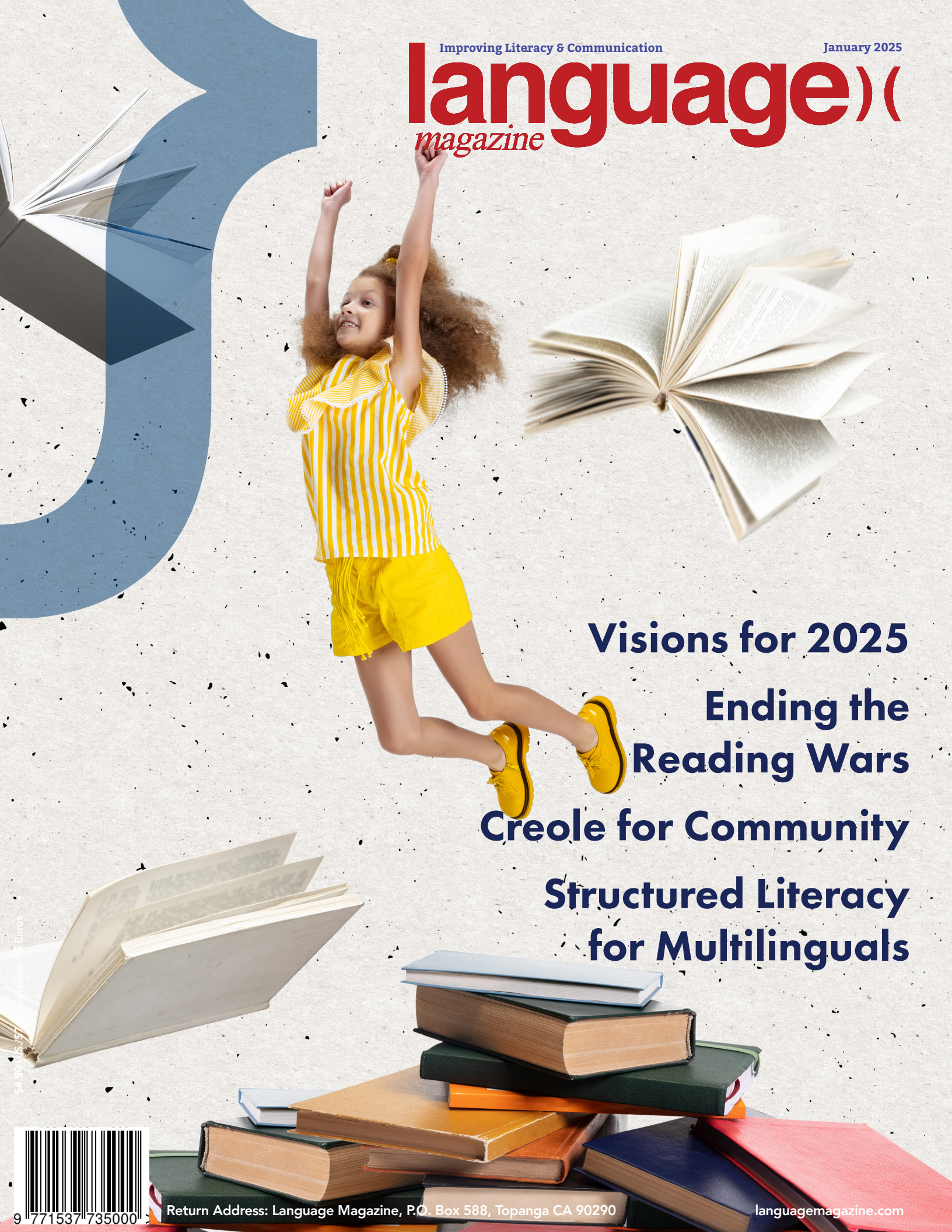
**Dr. Amanda Lanier** is an applied linguist and teacher educator at Michigan State University, where she directs the online graduate programs in foreign language teaching. She studies the intersections of language, culture, and technology, particularly in regard to critical and heritage languages. Find her at <https://maflt.cal.msu.edu/amanda-lanier>. You can also reach her on LinkedIn or through her website and access the resources that she and her students have created and shared on the MAFLT website (<https://maflt.cal.msu.edu>) and on their showcase of master's projects created by teachers, for teachers (<https://maflthouse.commons.msu.edu>). 



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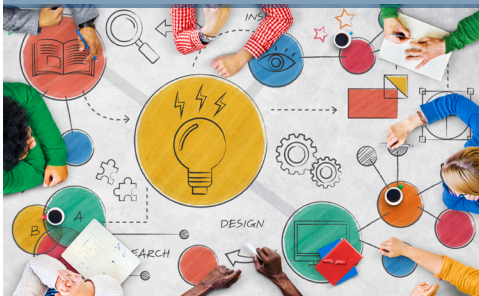
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