Foreign Language Teaching: Preparing World Citizens through Global Education

“The principal goal of education is to create men who are capable of doing new things, not simply of repeating what other generations have done…” (Piaget)

In the last decade, the interest in global citizenship has significantly increased as educational institutions, in particular universities and other tertiary level institutes attempt to design different methods of meeting the demands of globalization, as it relates to teaching and learning. Several educators have come to share the view that the solution is for these tertiary level institutions to develop new forms of pedagogy that will prepare students to become global citizens in a world that is increasingly marked by diversity, change, interdependence and cross-cultural interactions. The consensus, furthermore, seems to be a new teaching/learning paradigm - a curriculum which not only fosters an understanding of the multi-faceted nature of 21st century life, but simultaneously fosters individual development and collective growth, while preparing students for success in a globalized space. This type of education, denominated as Global Education, has been defined in different ways, including the view that Global Education aims to extend students’ awareness of the world in which they live, by opening them to an awareness of the world in which they live (globaleducation.edu).

Global Education is also promoted for its perceived potential to develop greater understanding of economic systems, literature, cultures, technological advancements in students, and to instil in them an interest in achieving excellence in all areas of life. Furthermore, in Global Education, all teaching/learning of content in different disciplines is designed to help students to develop knowledge, as well as core values of integrity, civic responsibility, respect and an understanding of human freedom. All of this is seen as being essential in the preparation
of graduates who are able to cope with the various ways in which the 21st century will change human existence (Hudson, 2012).

Given the peculiar linguistic context of the Caribbean, the graduate of tertiary institutions in the region, would also be better prepared for world citizenship, through solid programmes which equip them to exhibit high levels of competence in English Language. The fact that English continues to be in a second language position for many Caribbean students, makes this very important. Without question, those of us who teach Caribbean students need to collaborate in order to help them to come to regard writing in English as an indispensable intellectual activity and one that can enable them to participate in debates about the issues, ambiguities and complexities that affect the Caribbean post-colonial condition. We need moreover, to help students to understand how writing in English can empower them to develop and exercise individual agency and establish independent identities (Ramsay, 2008). Without doubt, the need for them to be able to express themselves orally in English, in contexts that require this, should be given equal attention.

English language; therefore, must be rigorously taught, drawing on foreign language teaching strategies to allow our students to practice it in a wide range of contexts even at the tertiary level, so that they will develop communicative competence in the language. At the same time, the Caribbean graduate who will inevitably become a citizen of a world that extends beyond the Caribbean and CARICOM regions will also need to develop proficiency in languages that are increasingly important in the global economy such as Spanish, Portuguese, French, Chinese and Japanese, in order to be competitive economically and socially.
The teaching of foreign languages has for some time now, been promoted as being pivotal for the personal, cognitive and general academic benefits they provide. Many specialists in foreign language pedagogy draw attention to the ways in which the study of foreign languages enhances reading abilities and linguistic awareness, promotes problem solving abilities, improves the ability to hypothesize and in general, correlates with enhanced intelligence. However, not enough is being done to cogently signal the potential of the study of foreign languages to help students discover societies outside of their own.

In the Caribbean, graduates of the regional University of the West Indies in particular, and university graduates in general are expected to play central roles in the social, economic and political development of their respective Caribbean countries. The unique characteristics of small Caribbean States and the cultural climate in these States tend to hinder the emergence of vibrant and active graduates. There is constant need then, for change and development, which can be achieved through the adoption of teaching approaches which are shaped by concepts of Global Education, so that these institutions do not merely become microcosms of the societies in which they are situated.

This situation can be averted through more serious and dedicated foreign language teaching and learning. One important way in which foreign languages can be used as instruments of Global Education is to align foreign language course learning outcomes and delivery, with University Strategic Planning. More and more Universities are developing Strategic Plans that reveal their desire to engage in internationalization activities. Indeed strategic plans of Universities can be aligned with the Operational Plans and specific objectives and learning approaches for teaching foreign languages in departments with the goal of preparing students who can live and work in different parts of the globe, and who have a good understanding of
how different societies function. The teaching of foreign languages is pivotal to this agenda of helping students to engage with international events and to be able to discuss them with deeper insight.

Global citizenship involves understanding political rights and responsibilities. Foreign Language teaching without question, can aid in this regard by expanding the content of courses beyond grammar and linguistic components to include material that addresses global issues. These include discussions and debates on topics such as climate change, HIV/AIDS, civil wars and how these affect people across the world. Deliberate strategies must also be used to address cross-cultural issues in an effort to help students develop inter-cultural competence. Reading experiences in foreign languages and activities such as dialogue production or conversation can also be used to inform students about global events and development, to expand their perspective and help create an understanding of democracy in speech, and respect for the views of others, all of which are important to becoming responsible citizens of their countries and the world.

Many global issues are of such seriousness and applicability to human beings everywhere, that they warrant being researched and discussed by students, during the course of their education. In this regard mention must be made of the Japan Association of Language Teachers which has developed a course called, “Global Issues in Language Education”. In this course, students are given an opportunity to research, read about and discuss the severity of many global issues and of how they affect human beings in different parts of the world. This undoubtedly helps to develop their speaking, reading and writing skills as they express their understanding of these issues both orally and in writing in their foreign language classes. This is indeed, a commendable effort to make language learning serve the purpose of raising the
awareness of citizens, who need to understand the world in which they live, while improving their ability to express themselves in a foreign tongue.

The world is characterized by diversity and difference. The University graduate must understand this and be prepared to embrace differences in fellow citizens of the world, as an integral part of humanity. Problems such as cultural prejudices and stereotypes, racism, classism and sexism can be explored in foreign language classrooms. There are many newspapers, magazines and books which explore these issues that are readily available for use in the foreign language class. This kind of exposure can systematically aid in the development of cultural empathy and an understanding of the inter-connections among people and their inter-dependence on each other.

Without question, Foreign Language classes can be used to challenge students to engage with larger issues and public matters as a move away from over-used topics that are often discussed in simple everyday language - my home, my university, and my favourite foods, my family, - which are some of the everyday, mundane topics that are usually done with reasonable ease in the foreign language class. For instance, research has shown that citizenship has to do with understanding the public sphere and engaging with different policies that have a role in the functioning of this public sphere. Students who are being prepared to become world citizens need to be presented with different languages to discuss policies in the public domain. This can be encouraged through cultural links such as email correspondence with students and other persons living in countries of the target language. Guest lectures by native speakers involved in policy making could also be done, as well as face to face discussion sessions designed to help students learn about different types of policies and policy making. This will not only help to develop an awareness of world citizenship and its broad expanse, but will also expand their view
of the world, and help them to come to appreciate policy issues on both the local and global levels. This means that students in the Social Sciences for instance should be exposed to other ways of expressing some of the content they are learning. The will moreover, need other languages to access much of the research on different aspects of their discipline.

University students, who are being prepared for global citizenship, must be able to operate in a global business environment. The offerings in foreign language courses, particularly languages such as: English, French, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese must include business courses which will equip students with the language of business, marketing, economics and banking, so as to enable them to secure jobs and engage in the important discourse on business related matters in different world economies. Awareness of cultural practices, social customs and ethical practices across linguistic borders will facilitate integration and enhance success of business-related activities.

Finally, Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) has a multifaceted role to play in preparing students to be citizens of the world. In addition to preparing students to develop communicative competence in its different forms – linguistic competence, strategic competence and discourse competence, to be able to communicate with persons from different countries, FLT also has a political agenda to fulfil. A radical transformation in the content of Spanish, French, Chinese, Portuguese, Japanese, English or any Foreign Language programme, can help to have an impact on the values and knowledge that students need to understand tolerance for all people. This also includes understanding human rights, civic matters, developing ways of connecting with other peoples and finding ways of responding to and dealing with international events and crises. A global education approach to teaching in general will integrate local and global policies into
curriculum content to help students understand their roles in contributing to global communities, so as to develop their social and personal responsibilities at both the local and global levels.

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