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Globalization, internationalization, and language learning in Russia

Liudmila Verbitskaya

In reviewing international trends over the last few decades, two words—globalization and internationalization—inevitably come to mind. Thinkers around the world are pondering these processes, which are rooted in the technological and social changes of the last quarter of the twentieth century.

The notions of globalization and internationalization are obviously related, but exactly what do they mean? In *The Globalization of Higher Education*, Peter Scott (1998a) concludes that not only are the words not synonyms, but the processes they denote are radically different and even dialectically opposed.

Globalization and internationalization defined

Internationalization is the older concept. It presupposes and reflects a world order dominated by nation-states. Its distinguishing features are cross-communication and exchange between separate nations.

By contrast, globalization refers to the impact of global environmental changes and the threat of political and social conflicts that cannot be walled off by immigration policies or controlled by superpowers. The term encompasses the growth of hybrid world cultures, the mingling of national traditions, intensified collaboration among nations, and a global division of labour. Globalization is inevitably bound up with the emergence of a knowledge society that trades in symbolic goods, worldwide brands, and scientific know-how.

Although still used to describe the interdependence of national economies, globalization has more recently come to stand as well for the social, political, cultural, and educational changes occurring *within* nations as a result of global pressures on local policies (Tjeldvol 1997).

J.Urry (1998) is one of many observers who have noted that global networks and new technologies have shrunk time and space and are transcending societal control and regulation. Although it is now possible to entertain the idea of global citizenship—involving global risks, global rights,

and global duties, the organizations that facilitate the process of globalization—among them the United Nations, the World Bank, the European Union, Greenpeace, and CNN—have so far not fully replaced the lost local and national sovereignty—particularly in economic and financial areas.

But globalization can also work to the advantage of social and economic development in developing countries and among disadvantaged groups of society.

In any event, globalization has become a permanent feature of our social, economic, and cultural space. It might help us to understand and accept that the world continues to undergo immense transformations and is beset by problems that can and must be dealt with on a worldwide basis (Sadlak 1998).

Globalization, internationalization, and change in higher education

Together, globalization and internationalization are transforming our universities.

The internationalization of universities is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, higher education has always had an international flavor. The idea of cross-cultural cooperation in culture, science, and education was quite pronounced as early as in the seventeenth century. In medieval Europe, students wandered from Bologna to Paris to Oxford, and university education transcended national frontiers.

The twentieth century opened a new page in the universities' transcendence of national boundaries. In the first half of the century colonial empires created universities in their overseas dependencies, mainly for training colonial administrative elites. As the colonies gained independence, the process took on a new meaning. The new universities no longer aspired simply to reproduce Western higher education but now sought to understand and meet local needs. Under both conditions, the international activities of Western universities centered on the transfer of higher education models to colonial and postcolonial countries.

After the second world war, the internationalization of university life in Europe and North America became much more differentiated. During the

cold war, East and West vied for influence among developing nations. Governments eagerly provided funds to bring students from Africa and other continents to their universities. The Soviet Union, before its collapse in late 1980s, welcomed thousands of students from the developing world to its best universities. Among the training programs created for instructors who worked with foreigners was an excellent system for teaching the Russian language to foreigners.

In the 1980s and 1990s, international academic cooperation became important for other than political reasons, as a restructured world economy and new world markets came to drive the internationalization of higher education. International student mobility burgeoned—increasing by more than 300 percent in the last quarter of the century (Brunch and Barty 1998). But new forms of international cooperation emerged as well. Today, internationalization in higher education implies curricular reform, research cooperation, discipline-based networks and associations, distance learning across frontiers, regional and cross-border institutional partnerships, and international work placements.

The benefits of internationalization in higher education

The UNESCO Policy Paper for Change and Development in Higher Education (UNESCO 1995) underlines the importance of internationalization not only for higher education but also for sustainable human development. The growing internationalization of higher education, according to the Policy Paper, is primarily a reflection of the global character of learning and research, which is being reinforced by economic and political integration, the growing need for intercultural understanding, and the global nature of modern communications and consumer markets.

The Policy Paper underlines the fundamental role of higher education in the development, transfer, and sharing of knowledge. International cooperation helps to narrow the gaps between nations and between regions in science and technology and to improve understanding among individuals and peoples so as to promote the culture of peace. Its other advantages are obvious: scarce resources can be pooled, duplication of effort can be avoided, and projects can be chosen and designed in light of by collective agreement and after careful review.

An individual university can never hope to attain the highest standards in every field. This is why interuniversity cooperation is becoming increasingly important to avoid the marginalization of certain institutions, particularly in developing countries, and to make academic excellence more readily available through a division of tasks among universities.

The importance of internationalization is well recognized by educators and governments. It broadens the knowledge base of participating institutions, increases the scope of research, enriches curricula. The presence of international students and academics widens the cultural horizons of home students and staff. Students return home after overseas training to develop their societies in a process of exchange that contributes to global political and economic stability (Callan 1998).

International education and training also promote personal development. Regardless of their field of study, those who take part in international programs develop the following abilities:

- to recognize and deal with differences
- to understand *emic* and *etic* thinking—the difference between perceiving another culture from the inside and from the outside
- to recognize the “knowledge gap” that is an inevitable characteristic of a mind brought up in one culture
- to communicate cross-culturally
- to become aware of one’s *lack* of knowledge, an awareness that stimulates the desire to learn
- to think comparatively
- to change one’s self-perception
- to compare one’s own country cross-culturally
- to learn about other cultures from within
- to diagnose situations encountered in other societies, both personal and educational
- to understand differentiation, which is essential for comparative thinking
- to understand a variety of learning styles. (Mestenhauser 1997)

The language barrier in international cooperation

What are the conditions that make international cooperation possible and successful? And what practical problems confront educational institutions wishing to engage in international cooperation?

Language. In addition to the lack of financing, inadequate information, and differences in organization and curriculum, one of the most serious problems in the internationalization and globalization of higher education is language.

Although it may not present a problem for cooperative programs based on ex-colonial links or between countries using the same language, elsewhere language issues—and language courses—constitute a big part of international programs.

Internationalization in higher education would not have gone far if it had not been for the *lingua franca* of international exchanges—English—which has helped many nations maintain and develop their international contacts. Despite criticism from those who perceive a risk of “ghettoization” of international students in English-taught programs or who are otherwise reluctant to teach or study in a language other than their own, that situation is not likely to change in the near future (Callan 1998).

One of the first prerequisites for successful international cooperation is, literally, the “mutual understanding” that comes from teaching and learning in a common language. That often means offering academic programs in a language that prospective foreign students will understand. Many European countries have signaled their conversion to internationalization by introducing English-taught courses to accommodate or attract foreign faculty and students (Elliott 1998).

As programs in English have proliferated, governments have consistently emphasized the need for language competence in policies aimed at internationalizing campuses and integrating international components into curricula (Callan 1998). In this respect, West European countries, with their tradition of language education, have an advantage over Russia.

Language learning behind the Iron Curtain

Life behind the Iron Curtain was not particularly conducive to learning foreign languages. Primary and secondary school language programs gave a very general idea of grammar and vocabulary but did not teach children to communicate. At the university level, students in specialized programs could reach a high level of language proficiency, but it was not common for average Russians to be fluent in a foreign language.

In those days, contacts with foreigners were viewed with suspicion, and one could get in serious trouble for corresponding with a foreign friend or receiving visitors from abroad. Language learners could not buy magazines or newspapers or see a new film in the language they were trying to master. Even listening to the BBC or the Voice of America was discouraged, and for most people foreign travel was an unattainable dream. Students who did not major in languages met their language requirement by showing that they had read a certain number of texts. University programs for prospective foreign-language teachers included few contemporary radio and television programs, being based instead on nineteenth-century literature.

It is surprising that under these very limiting conditions a very effective method of teaching foreign languages was developed in Russia.

... And once the curtain came down

Things changed drastically in the late 1980s, as borders opened and people started to travel and do business with foreign partners. Interest to learning languages boomed, and now children know that they need languages for life.

It has become common for students at St. Petersburg University, regardless of their field of study, to speak one or two foreign languages. Most students and faculty members can communicate more or less well in English. At St. Petersburg alone English is taught in eight separate departments. Nine centers offer academic programs in English to outside customers. Today, some 500 individuals are involved in teaching English at St. Petersburg University.

Two new faculties of the university—management, founded in 1993, and international relations, founded in 1994—exemplify the efforts of Russian academics to integrate themselves into the global educational community. Here language learning plays a prominent part.

The new faculties emerged thanks to extensive connections with overseas partners. The faculty of management, in cooperation with the Haas School of Business at the University of California at Berkeley, trains its staff in the top universities and business schools of the United States, Sweden, Germany, and other countries. The faculty has excellent links with foreign businesses operating in St. Petersburg. Several years ago they began to offer a master's degree in international business, taught in English, one of very few programs taught in a language other than Russian.

The faculty of international relations, although quite young, has already become a member of the American Association of Professional Schools of International Affairs (APSIA). Students must take two foreign languages. Most of the faculty specialize in international relations and diplomacy, area studies, history, and world politics.

Globalization—and the internationalization of education—demand more attention to history, area studies, and cross-cultural studies. In addition to being taught in the faculty of international relations at St. Petersburg University, these subjects form part of the language program offered in the university departments of philology. Sociologists, too, do significant cross-cultural work.

Finally—the Center for Russian Language and Culture at St. Petersburg University. We believe that Russian is one of the most important world languages—not only because millions of people speak it, but also because of the huge contribution of Russian literature to world culture. The center provides programs for foreign students, faculty, and specialists, accepting more than 1,000 students annually from 40 countries of the world. Sixty highly qualified instructors teach Russian as a foreign language in standard and tailor-made programs for all sorts of customers.

An eye to the future

It is hard to believe that so much can have changed in just 10 years, but there remains plenty of room for improvement in our current language

programs. We still have far to go to improve our range of offerings in other languages. University language programs for students not majoring in languages are still oriented toward passive skills—reading and translation. Students are trained in grammar, typically using specialized texts. Thus trained, they are able to find their way in their field of specialization, but oral communication and competent written expression remain problems.

The processes of globalization in which we are all involved require that all students—not just language students—should get more substantial training in foreign languages than they do now, using a wider range of methods. Given the lack of funds and high teaching load of our language instructors, it will not be an easy task. But here, as elsewhere, the solution may lie in more and better international cooperation, such as that represented by the conference from which this volume has emerged.

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