



Foreign Language Studies in India

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Abstract

Foreign language studies in India have undergone significant transformation, reflecting the country's evolving socio-economic and educational priorities. Traditionally rooted in humanistic and philological traditions, foreign language education today is increasingly being shaped by global market demands and vocational aspirations. Languages such as German, French, Spanish, Japanese, and Korean are gaining popularity, especially in the context of international trade, outsourcing industries, and higher education mobility. However, this rapid expansion has exposed systemic challenges including lack of curricular depth, uneven access, inadequate policy frameworks, and limited institutional recognition. The tension between foreign languages as utilitarian tools and as vehicles for cultural understanding forms the core of the present academic dilemma. This research critically examines this dichotomy and proposes a balanced pedagogical vision anchored in the concept of transcultural competence. Drawing from both theoretical insights and comparative educational models, the study highlights the need to treat foreign language learning not only as skill development but as a transformative educational process. It calls for integrated curricula, early exposure, independent departments, and teacher training that emphasize cultural literacy alongside linguistic proficiency. Ultimately, the study advocates for a redefined understanding of foreign language education in India—one that blends market readiness with global citizenship and intercultural empathy.

Keywords: Transcultural competence, Foreign language education, Vocational vs. humanistic learning, Language policy in India, Cultural mediation

Introduction

Foreign language studies encompass the academic exploration of languages other than one's native tongue, including their structure, literature, cultural context, and practical use. These studies are interdisciplinary by nature, combining linguistics, literature, cultural studies, history, translation, and pedagogy. In the Indian academic context, foreign languages commonly refer to European (such as German, French, Spanish), East Asian (Japanese, Korean, Chinese), and other non-Indian languages. The scope of foreign language studies is not merely confined to developing communication skills, but also includes fostering cross-cultural understanding, comparative literary analysis, and equipping individuals to work in international contexts. With globalization and digital interconnectedness, foreign language proficiency has evolved from a niche intellectual pursuit into a vital academic and professional asset.

India's multilingual and multicultural fabric offers a unique background for the study of foreign languages. As a country historically engaged with various cultures through trade, colonization, and diplomacy, India has long recognized the strategic and intellectual value of learning foreign languages. In the post-liberalization era, the demand for multilingual professionals has grown significantly due to the rise of multinational corporations, outsourcing industries, and diplomatic engagements. Foreign language knowledge enhances employability in diverse sectors such as IT, tourism, international business, translation, and academia. Moreover, it allows Indian students and scholars to access global knowledge systems, engage in international education, and participate meaningfully in global dialogues. Despite this, foreign language education in India faces challenges related to policy recognition, academic depth, and resource allocation.

One of the central debates in foreign language education in India is the tension between humanistic and vocational orientations. While many learners pursue foreign languages to gain marketable skills, experts argue for a deeper, philological approach that emphasizes literature, culture, and critical thinking. This dual demand places foreign language departments at a curricular crossroads—caught between responding to immediate job market needs and preserving their identity as centers of cultural and humanistic education. The concept of

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"transcultural competence"—the ability to navigate and interpret multiple cultural frameworks—emerges as a key solution to this dilemma. In India's complex socio-cultural landscape, foreign language studies thus have the potential to cultivate not just global professionals, but also cosmopolitan thinkers who can mediate between traditions, identities, and worldviews.

Historical Background

The study of foreign languages in India has a long and evolving trajectory shaped by colonial history, intellectual engagement, and global interactions. During the British colonial period, language education was strategically deployed for administrative convenience, with English gaining prominence through policy initiatives such as Thomas Babington Macaulay's Minute of 1835. However, the colonial era also witnessed a growing Indian curiosity in European languages such as French and German, which were introduced primarily through missionary schools, elite institutions, and select universities. In pre-independence India, foreign languages were largely confined to the elite academic circles or niche interests in literature, philosophy, and diplomacy. Their utility remained limited and largely disconnected from the broader Indian educational system, which focused on vernacular and classical languages alongside English.

Post-independence, foreign language studies began to gain a more structured form, especially with the establishment of dedicated centers such as the Centre of German Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University and similar departments in institutions like Banaras Hindu University, Delhi University, and later IITs. The liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991 marked a significant turning point, as globalization expanded the scope of foreign language proficiency beyond academic interest to economic necessity. This shift was further reinforced by India's increasing participation in global trade, international relations, and IT-enabled services, where knowledge of foreign languages—especially European and East Asian—became a competitive advantage. Despite the increased demand, systemic challenges persisted. Reports by bodies like the University Grants Commission (UGC) in 1990 and 2001 emphasized the lack of uniformity in foreign language policies, insufficient infrastructure, and minimal recognition of these languages as independent academic disciplines. In recent years, although more universities have added foreign language courses, curricular innovation has often lagged behind global trends. The historical development of foreign language studies in India thus reflects a complex interplay between educational policy, economic transformations, and cultural aspirations—oscillating between a utilitarian vision and the enduring value of humanistic learning.

Current Landscape

Foreign language studies in India today present a dynamic yet uneven landscape marked by growth in interest but disparity in infrastructure and academic depth. Languages such as German, French, Spanish, Japanese, Korean, and Mandarin have gained popularity, especially among students seeking employment in multinational companies, tourism, diplomacy, or translation services. Many central and state universities now offer certificate, diploma, undergraduate, and postgraduate programs in these languages. Prestigious institutions like Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi University, EFLU Hyderabad, and IITs have dedicated departments or centers for foreign language studies, reflecting the academic acknowledgment of their importance. In addition, private universities and language institutes have entered the space, often offering more vocationally oriented, skill-based programs aimed at producing job-ready graduates.

However, despite this expansion, several structural issues continue to challenge the quality and consistency of foreign language education in India. According to UGC reports and more recent academic commentary, there is a significant lack of uniform policies across states regarding the inclusion of foreign languages at the school level. In most cases, foreign languages are introduced only at the undergraduate or elective level, with few state boards integrating them into the secondary school curriculum. Furthermore, in many universities, foreign language programs are still housed under departments of English or linguistics, rather than as



independent faculties. This arrangement tends to limit the academic autonomy and growth of these languages as distinct disciplines. Additionally, access to modern teaching tools, multimedia labs, and up-to-date curriculum resources remains limited in many institutions, particularly outside of metro cities. The increase in student interest has not been matched by sufficient faculty recruitment or professional development opportunities for existing teachers. Moreover, many learners approach foreign languages with purely utilitarian motives—driven by job market demands—leading to surface-level engagement with the language and minimal exposure to its cultural and literary dimensions. While the quantity of programs has increased, the quality and depth required for developing true “transcultural competence” are still lacking in many settings. The current landscape thus reflects a moment of opportunity and challenge—where the growing demand must be met with academic rigor, infrastructural investment, and a balanced vision of foreign language education.

Theoretical Perspectives

Foreign language studies in India are shaped by a fundamental theoretical tension: the contrast between philological-humanistic traditions and vocational-utilitarian approaches. The philological perspective views language learning as an academic discipline rooted in literature, cultural history, and linguistic analysis. It emphasizes deep engagement with the texts, traditions, and intellectual currents of the target language's culture. This approach is closely aligned with the idea of language as a humanistic endeavor—one that fosters critical thinking, cross-cultural understanding, and personal transformation. Milind Brahme (2020) highlights this in his call for foreign language teachers to adopt a more expansive identity—as educators and cultural mediators, not just trainers. He proposes “transcultural competence” as a vital learning outcome, where learners not only acquire communication skills but also develop the ability to reflect on their own culture through the lens of another. This reflective, comparative process is rooted in the hermeneutic tradition, encouraging learners to undergo a transformation in self-understanding through interaction with the “other.”

On the other hand, the growing vocational orientation in Indian foreign language education responds to the demands of the global economy. With increased job opportunities in translation, tourism, BPOs, MNCs, and international relations, many institutions design courses to meet immediate market needs—focusing on functional fluency, business communication, and soft skills. This utilitarian trend is supported by curriculum development committees like those of the UGC, which encourage “need-based syllabi” to align with industry requirements. However, this approach often results in surface-level engagement, where language learning is reduced to transactional competence. Critics argue that such an orientation risks undermining the academic integrity of the field, transforming foreign language departments into service providers rather than centers of scholarship. Theoretical frameworks like translanguaging and transcultural pedagogy challenge this reductive model by advocating for a more integrated, critical, and cosmopolitan form of education—where students learn to navigate, negotiate, and critique multiple cultural contexts. In the Indian context, achieving this balance remains a complex challenge. While vocational pathways are essential for employability, the broader intellectual and cultural dimensions of language education must be preserved to ensure the development of well-rounded, globally aware citizens.

Comparative Analysis

When analyzing foreign language education in India through a comparative lens, it becomes clear that India faces distinct challenges and opportunities due to its unique sociolinguistic landscape. In contrast to countries like Germany, France, or Japan—where foreign language learning is often embedded in national policy from early schooling—India lacks a standardized framework for introducing foreign languages at the primary or secondary level. Most Indian students are exposed to foreign languages only at the undergraduate level, and often in the form of optional or certificate courses. This late introduction limits both the depth and duration of exposure necessary for high proficiency. In European countries, by contrast, learning multiple languages from early childhood is common, supported by robust national policies, teacher



training programs, and curriculum integration. Moreover, in countries such as the UK or Canada, language learning is increasingly aligned with Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) models, where subjects like history or science are taught through the medium of a foreign language, thus reinforcing linguistic and academic competencies simultaneously. Another notable difference lies in how foreign languages are positioned within academic structures. In Europe, East Asia, and North America, foreign language departments often function as independent faculties, with a strong emphasis on research, literature, and cultural studies. In India, however, foreign languages are frequently subsumed under broader departments such as English or linguistics, limiting their institutional autonomy. This structural arrangement impacts curriculum design, funding, and the recognition of foreign language studies as a full-fledged academic discipline. As highlighted by Brahme (2020), many Indian universities still treat foreign language education as a utilitarian skill rather than a comprehensive cultural and intellectual pursuit. In contrast, universities in Germany or the US often emphasize philological study and intercultural analysis, supported by research funding and international collaborations. This institutional support allows foreign language education in those countries to thrive not just as a means to employment, but as a scholarly field that contributes to global understanding.

Despite these differences, India can draw valuable lessons from global models while also offering insights of its own. The concept of “transcultural competence,” as proposed in Indian academic discussions, aligns with international frameworks that stress intercultural communicative competence. However, India’s multilingual environment and colonial past create additional layers of complexity that make foreign language learning both more necessary and more challenging. Unlike monolingual societies, Indian learners already navigate multiple linguistic systems, which can be leveraged in a more strategic way to enhance foreign language acquisition. Furthermore, the rising popularity of East Asian languages in India—mirroring trends in other parts of the world—shows the global convergence of economic interests with language policy. By learning from global best practices while recognizing its own cultural and educational diversity, India has the potential to redefine foreign language education—not just as a response to globalization, but as a means to cultivate globally conscious, culturally grounded citizens.

Research problem

Foreign language education in India occupies a paradoxical space—growing in demand yet underdeveloped in structure, widely pursued yet inconsistently implemented. While globalization, international mobility, and the outsourcing industry have created a substantial market demand for multilingual professionals, the academic foundations of foreign language studies remain fragile. Despite the increasing popularity of languages such as German, French, Japanese, and Korean, there is a significant disconnect between how these languages are taught and the broader educational and cultural goals they could serve.

The central problem lies in the curricular and ideological divide between foreign languages as vocational skills and as humanistic disciplines. On one hand, learners and institutions increasingly treat foreign languages as job-oriented tools for communication. On the other, there is an urgent need to preserve and promote foreign languages as disciplines that encourage cultural awareness, critical thinking, and identity exploration. This tension has led to shallow curricula, underprepared faculty, limited institutional support, and marginalization of language studies within broader academic frameworks.

Furthermore, there is a lack of uniformity in foreign language policy across schools and universities, along with insufficient infrastructure and training opportunities. Many institutions fail to provide sustained exposure, cultural context, or even basic proficiency, thus undermining both academic depth and employability.

This research, therefore, seeks to critically examine the state of foreign language studies in India—its aims, challenges, and contradictions—while exploring how a balance between



transcultural competence and market relevance can be achieved to shape a more holistic and sustainable educational framework.

Conclusion

Foreign language studies in India stand at a critical juncture, navigating a complex interplay between global economic demands and the intrinsic educational value of linguistic and cultural diversity. While the field has seen significant growth in terms of student interest, institutional offerings, and market relevance, it continues to struggle with issues of academic recognition, policy uniformity, and curricular depth. The overemphasis on utilitarian goals—driven largely by the needs of industry—has often come at the cost of undermining the humanistic and philosophical roots of language education. Foreign languages are not merely tools of communication but gateways to cultural understanding, self-reflection, and intellectual expansion. The concept of "transcultural competence" provides a compelling framework to reconcile these competing demands by emphasizing not just the ability to use a language, but also the capacity to navigate and interpret diverse cultural realities. For this balance to be realized, Indian institutions must rethink their approach: providing early exposure to foreign languages, fostering teacher development, establishing independent language departments, and creating syllabi that integrate both practical and reflective components. Drawing on global best practices—such as CLIL models, immersion techniques, and interdisciplinary frameworks—while being mindful of India's multilingual realities, can lead to a more sustainable and enriching model of foreign language education. Ultimately, the goal should be to nurture learners who are not only linguistically proficient but also culturally empathetic, critically aware, and globally competent—individuals who see language learning not just as a means to an end, but as a lifelong process of becoming more connected to the world and to themselves.

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