

Expanding Language Instruction through Digital Tools

When I entered middle school, I was asked to decide between two foreign languages. Other young learners, including in the rural school district where I now live, are provided just one option. My young neighbors and I have something in common with nearly all American students of foreign languages. According to the National Council of Less Commonly Taught Languages (NCOLCTL), 91 percent of us have engaged in the study of a major European language: French, German, or Spanish.

This past spring, a group of scholars assembled in a conference room in Washington, DC, to explore ways to increase access to Asian LCTLs (less commonly taught languages) at American schools and universities. The panel, which appeared in the conference program of the annual Association of Asian Studies (AAS) as “Expanding Language Instruction on Your Campus: New Possibilities through Distance,” was organized by the AAS’s outgoing president, Katherine Bowie. Panelists focused on Asian languages beyond Mandarin Chinese and Japanese, languages like Burmese, Indonesian, Manchu, and Urdu.

One does not have to look too far beyond the LCTL acronym itself to get a sense of why these languages are hard to come by at any level of American schooling. As less commonly taught languages, it can be difficult to attract a critical mass of students to justify the required investment in staffing and learning materials. Where programs do already exist, lower enrollments make them perennial targets for institutions looking to trim budgets.

Bowie’s experience shows both the precarious position of these programs and one promising path toward expanding access to them. In 2011, she began as director of the University of Wisconsin’s (UW) Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS), just as cuts to both federal and state education spending threatened its survival. As she told the *#AsiaNow* blog: “We began developing distance instruction, establishing swaps with other universities in which we exported languages they did not teach, and imported languages we were not teaching. As a result, we not only maintained the five Southeast Asian languages we were already offering, but were able to add two more by importing them from other universities.” After seeing the potential of digital-powered distance education, Bowie has now taken the lead by creating a portal funded by the Henry Luce Foundation: the *AAS Language Database* (aaslanguage database.wisc.edu), which works to catalog university-level programs teaching a combined twenty-seven Asian LCTLs.

THE CASE FOR LCTLs

But why do Bowie and others see the study of LCTLs as so important? Terms like “global understanding,” “global competency,” and “twenty-first-century skills” are certainly common themes. Richard Brecht from the American Councils Research Center zeroes in on the economic case in his argument for greater proficiency with LCTLs. He cites research from Education First’s English Proficiency Index (EPI) showing that among the eleven Asian countries that do not recognize English, French, German, or Spanish as a major language, none reached the “high proficiency” threshold of 58 (not to mention the “very high proficiency” mark of 62.5). Americans doing business in these places can struggle to navigate a foreign linguistic and cultural environment. He says that one in six US companies report a shortage

The screenshot shows the IndonesianPod101.com website. At the top, it says "IndonesianPod101.com" and "Learn Indonesian with IndonesianPod101.com". A "Sign In" button is in the top right. The main content area has a large grey box with the text "JOIN INDONESIANPOD101.COM NOW WITH A FREE LIFETIME ACCOUNT" and a large right-pointing arrow. To the right of this is a sign-up form titled "Learn Indonesian in the fastest, easiest and most fun way". The form includes a "Create Your Free Account" section with a "Select Your Level" dropdown menu, an "E-Mail Address" input field, and a "Join Now" button. Below the form are social media options: "Or sign up using Facebook" and "Connect with Facebook". At the bottom of the sign-up area, there is a small disclaimer: "By clicking Join Now, you agree to our Terms of Use, Privacy Policy, and to receive our email communications, which you may opt out at any time." Below the sign-up area is a row of six icons with labels: "Over 880 Audio and Video Lessons", "Knowledgeable and Energetic Hosts", "Vocabulary Learning Tools and Spaced Repetition Flashcards", "Detailed PDF Lesson Notes", "Lively Community Forum and Lesson Discussion", and "Learn on-the-go! Study anywhere!".

Source: "IndonesianPod101" page view from the *Mango* website.

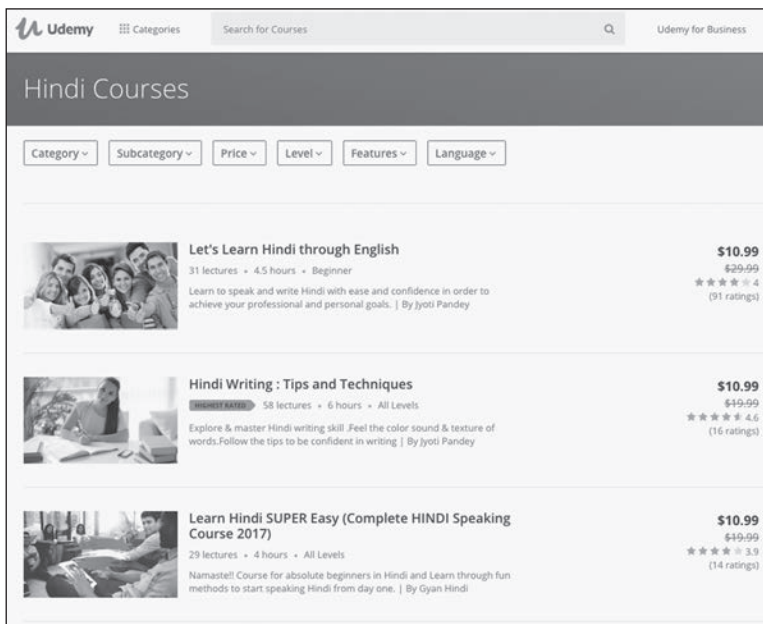
in LCTL skills, while related misunderstandings may cost them up to US \$2 billion a year.

Even though the practical motivations are compelling, mounting evidence on LCTL learners suggests that those who have so far actually dedicated time to the study of these languages are less instrumental and more intrinsically motivated than average foreign language learners. That is, they pick up the study of Dari or Thai because they are curious rather than because they are necessarily aiming to climb the corporate ladder. According to research by Alan Brown, 92 percent of those who pursue the study of LCTLs do so after already having engaged substantially in a more commonly taught language like Spanish or French. They also tend to be older and better educated overall, suggesting perhaps they are learning—like many Duolingo “high scorers”—for the sake of tackling a learning challenge.

AUTOMATED SOLUTIONS

That many LCTL learners turn to software in their initial exploration of LCTL learning is not a surprise. Digital tools are easy to access and tend to be less expensive than traditional course models. **Duolingo** is among the most popular of such tools due to its “gamification” of the direct-translation approach to language learning that frames the experience as “play,” rewards progress with badges, and encourages friendly competition. Its business model is “freemium,” meaning most of the content is available for free with advertising, joined by a paid upgrade tier without advertising. **Mango** (mangolanguages.com) follows a similar business model and includes an even wider selection of twenty Asian LCTLs. It aims to distinguish itself from Duolingo with a more conversational and culturally infused approach. Of course, there is also **Rosetta Stone**, which has been digitizing immersive language instruction for over a quarter-century.

Beyond neatly packaged apps, support for various LCTLs is scattered around the web, sometimes for free on platforms like YouTube and elsewhere for a fee through companies like **Innovative Language** and its collection of “pod101” courses (<https://goo.gl/AhNYMQ>). One site that features free tools in almost any Asian LCTL is the **Defense Language Institute** (<https://goo.gl/J13rEh>), which was created to support rapid training for military deployment, but includes exercises



Source: Hindi Partial Courses page view from the UdeMy website.



Source: Screen capture from the Flipgrid website.

like sample phone conversations that could be useful for all learners. Alternatively, MOOCs (massively open online courses) come perhaps closest to mimicking traditional language instruction. **UdeMy** was left out of the last issue's profile on MOOCs, though its "other languages" category (<https://goo.gl/iLDDEe>) features paid courses in Cantonese, Korean, Tagalog (Filipino), and several other Asian LCTLs.

THE "COMMUNICATIVE" CHALLENGE

Apps, online videos, and MOOCs are, however, only a partial solution. As Ellen Rafferty explains, research has shifted the emphasis in language education, first from translation to tightly structured "audio/lingual" drills, and now to a more interactive, spontaneous "communicative" approach that makes interaction both the means and ends of the language learning process. While earlier methods of language instruction can be automated fairly easily, communicative learning strategies cannot yet be robo-powered. Within this context, language instructors work to balance the access-expanding opportunities that

new technologies promise with the demands for an increased emphasis on spontaneity and original creation on the part of the language learner.

Juliana Wijaya, who teaches Indonesian through UCLA's Department of Asian Languages and Cultures, meets the demands of the communicative style by linking up directly with her students to create a kind of virtual classroom. To interact in real time with her students, she has found success using both basic video chat apps like Zoom and Skype, as well as somewhat more sophisticated software like Adobe Connect. Her syllabus is digitized using Moodle, a popular open-source course management platform. As relatively straightforward as that sounds, she reports that "distance learning is a lot of work, on both ends. It takes administrative, technological, and proctoring support. You also need help from language tutors." While valuable for pooling enrollment across campuses, she also cautions against anyone who sees distance learning as a way to replace face-to-face interaction.

While Wijaya's approach extends the typical classroom experience across space, Lauren Rosen, director of UW's Collaborative Language Program, confronts the variable of time as well.

She has found that many of her students struggle due to other commitments to find time in common to meet as a class—digital or otherwise. In response, she has adapted the communicative learning approach to be more asynchronous. Her take on it includes three elements: The first part is interpretive, covering reading and listening, which overlays authentic video with pop-up questions. The second is presentational, where students create slideshows or videos, upload their work, and then have peers comment on what they have created. These two elements need not be in real time, although the third, interpersonal, must be to allow for spontaneity. Her students, like Wijaya's, use video chat software like Zoom and Flipgrid.

Machine learning may one day allow for apps that can facilitate creative improvisation. In the meantime, dedicated instructors like Wijaya and Rosen are making the best use of existing technology to expand access to the study of Asian LCTLs. Of course, for these languages to substantially diversify the larger context of American foreign language education, as Bowie hopes, much more is needed. A cadre of sufficiently qualified instructors in these languages would need to be trained, substantial and sustained funding would need to be devoted to getting language learning resources like textbooks into schools or directly in the hands of learners, and ultimately some degree of institutional support would have to shift away from Spanish, French, and German. Even if such steps are unlikely in the near future, the new AAS database, paired with a commitment to distance education, will certainly help many at the university level. ■



JARED HALL is Dean of Academic Life at the Hotchkiss School in Lakeville, Connecticut, and teaches elective history courses on topics related to China and Japan. Previously, he was based in Kunming and Beijing from 2006 to 2015, serving most recently as a Teacher and Administrator at Peking University High School–Dalton Academy. You can follow his work on his website, *Discovering History* (www.discoveringhistory.org), and on Twitter (@jaredrhall).