Language Learning Under Fire: Budget Cuts, Artificial Intelligence, and the Closure of Foreign Language Departments in U.S. Universities

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Abstract

This paper addresses the current assault in the US on teaching foreign languages in higher education, and why this poses a threat to the quality of education at the university level. It starts by surveying the history of foreign language education in the US, then addresses the recent fiasco at the University of West Virginia, where the president of the university unilaterally cut all foreign-language teaching, removing whole departments of study and dismissing several faculty. The claim that the university undertook these cuts as a response to a financial shortfall is examined, and the effect these cuts had on higher level education generally is examined. The question is raised whether this trend reflects xenophobia or the belief that the need to study languages is being undermined by artificial intelligence (AI). Recently concern over the ability of AI to write student papers and work as a translation service is explored, and the concerns these developments raise for the quality of higher education is addressed. The limits of AI-generated translation are considered, showing how literal translation would be inadequate to understanding the nuanced verbal play and metaphorical interpretations needed for adequately conveying meaning in literary works. It is argued that the teaching of foreign languages is essential to higher education and bears further benefits in life in general.

Keywords

West Virginia University, foreign language teaching, second language teaching, bilingualism, Artificial Intelligence (AI).