

International Conference

The Language Barrier and Beyond: Language Learning and Cultural Literacy in South Asian Studies

Call for Papers

The Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and the University of Hawai'i are jointly organising an international conference on January 9-10 2027 at the Fuchu campus of the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies.

Last date for submitting abstracts: 15 August 2026

Concept note

One of the central challenges of language pedagogy is the cultivation of cultural literacy. This challenge becomes especially pronounced in foreign and heritage language classrooms, where students learn a language at a considerable distance - geographical, social, and experiential - from the communities in which it is spoken. For example, how can students of a South Asian language "know" what the "aroma of a mango orchard in Falgun" feels like in Tagore's song, if they have never smelled a mango panicle or experienced a South Asian summer? When they hear the dialogue, "But the Sharma's daughter-in-law can't be seen walking on streets" in Neeraj Ghaiwan's film "Geeli Pucchi", how do students really understand the "meaning" of the line? Teaching of cultural literacy is further complicated by programmatic and curriculum needs that can push language instructors (purposefully or not) to separate and prioritize language proficiency over cultural literacy; the latter is centered in "content" courses, while the former could prefer to focus on vocabulary, and grammatical, structural, and communicative learning. Students may also find it difficult to grasp cultural peculiarities and nuances in the language they are just beginning to learn.

New questions arise with the rising importance of AI and chatbots, as classroom helpers and potentially as replacers of language instructors and instruction itself. An AI chatbot can readily generate the sentence "blood is red," despite the fact that it can neither truly see color nor know what it feels like to see blood, one's own or someone else's. While some researchers argue that AI systems develop a rudimentary model of reality through mathematical and linguistic patterns, others point to their lack of embodied experience as evidence that they can never fully "understand" the world they describe. Human learners, fortunately, are not constrained in the same way: cultural literacy can be taught, cultivated, and acquired. Yet the comparison highlights a central question for language educators: how do we bridge the gap between linguistic

competence and cultural understanding and how do we preserve cultural literacy as the human element of foreign language learning as we move into its (AI) future.

This conference seeks to deliberate on how foreign language classrooms, and specifically South Asian language classrooms, can incorporate education of culture meaningfully and effectively. How do we overcome the language barrier in attaining cultural literacy? Conversely, how do we use the very act of language learning as a mode and method of cultural literacy? This task is particularly daunting for those studying less commonly taught languages, which frequently lack the extensive pedagogical repositories and specialized resources for non-native learners that are readily available for languages like Japanese or French. The foreign/heritage language classroom is of course not a monolith. Teachers of foreign/heritage languages include those who conduct their research in linguistics, literature, performance studies, cultural anthropology, history, and various other fields. How does language teaching interact with these disciplines in the classroom? We want to learn and discuss the varied ways in which teachers from different kinds of classrooms across the world incorporate cultural literacy in their language classroom. We also want to reflect upon the divide between language proficiency courses and culture or “content” courses, the divide that may get created for administrative and scholarly purposes. How can language courses become interdisciplinary and even cross-cultural in order to incorporate cultural literacy in the framework of language pedagogy.

The Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and the University of Hawai'i are organizing this conference jointly and inviting scholars and teachers from all parts of the world who teach any South Asian language as a foreign or heritage language to share their research and teaching methodologies, classroom experiences and exercises.

Submission Guidelines

We invite you to submit titles and abstracts for individual paper presentations. Each abstract should be 250-300 words long. Abstracts, and the final presentations, should all be in English. The final presentations would be around 20 minutes long.

Submit your title and abstract here: <https://forms.gle/98ZEXNzysyr5r4g78>

Topics may include but are not limited to (within the context of South Asian studies):

- Creating reading/listening material for cultural literacy in foreign/heritage language programs
- Integrating literary works, films, plays, poetry, songs, folklore etc. in foreign/heritage language programs
- Translation studies in foreign/heritage language programs
- Integrating history, sociology and other humanities and social sciences to create interdisciplinary foreign/heritage language programs
- The use of technology, especially AI, in foreign/heritage language programs

- Philosophy of language in the age of AI
- Literary studies / Performance studies / Visual arts studies as “foreign” studies
- Comparative literature / comparative culture studies (beyond national and ethnolinguistic boundaries)
- Creative writing / Performance / Project-based language learning
- The great divide between language proficiency courses and culture or “content” courses

Contact

Tariq Sheikh, Associate Professor, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies tariq.sheikh@tufs.ac.jp

Sai Bhatawadekar, Professor, University of Hawai'i saib@hawaii.edu