

# **Empowering Foreign Language Education within the New Liberal Arts Framework: A Tripartite Model for Sustainable Transformation**

Lan Li

School of Foreign Studies

Yangtze University

Jingzhou, Hubei, China

100469@yangtzeu.edu.cn

## **Abstract**

Foreign language education (FLE) is undergoing profound transformation under the dual pressures of technological disruption and educational reform. Generative artificial intelligence (GAI) has demonstrated capabilities in language processing that challenge the traditional focus on mechanical skills, meanwhile China's New Liberal Arts (NLA) initiative calls for interdisciplinary, value-oriented education that transcends conventional disciplinary boundaries. Confronting what Kramersch (2014) termed the "instrumentalist trap"—the reduction of language learning to decontextualized grammatical and communicative competence—this paper proposes a tripartite model of Curriculum Reconstruction, Teacher Agency, and Technology Mediation as an integrated framework for sustainable change. We argue that FLE must shift from "learning the code" to "reading the world," leveraging technology to foster critical cultural understanding, ethical reasoning, and interdisciplinary literacy. Ultimately, this approach seeks to align foreign language education with the goals of the NLA while affirming its enduring relevance in an AI-permeated era.

**Keywords:** Foreign Language Education; New Liberal Arts; Artificial Intelligence; Curriculum Reconstruction; Teacher Agency; Technology Mediation; Instrumentalist Trap

## **I Introduction**

Foreign language education (FLE) has reached a critical moment. For decades, dominant teaching methodologies have privileged the acquisition of linguistic skills—grammar, vocabulary, translation—over deeper engagement with culture, history, and meaning. Claire Kramersch (2014) named this tendency the “instrumentalist trap,” highlighting how such approaches treat language as a neutral tool rather than a culturally embedded practice. Yet today, two concurrent developments render this model not only increasingly inadequate but also professionally precarious.

Firstly, rapid advances in generative artificial intelligence (GAI) have enabled machines to perform many of the routine tasks that constitute conventional language instruction. Large language models now generate accurate translations, produce contextually appropriate texts, and emulate natural dialogue at a level comparable to or exceeding that of intermediate and even advanced learners. These capabilities force a fundamental re-examination of the outcomes and methods of foreign language teaching.

Secondly, China’s national higher education reform, known as the New Liberal Arts (NLA), has established ambitious new goals for humanities education. As outlined in the New Liberal Arts Construction Declaration (Ministry of Education, 2020), this initiative emphasizes interdisciplinary integration, the cultivation of cultural confidence, and the embodiment of socialist core values. It urges educators to move beyond fragmented knowledge and foster talents capable of critical and innovative engagement with complex global challenges.

In this context, FLE faces a dual imperative: to respond meaningfully to the affordances and disruptions of GAI, and to contribute substantively to the NLA's vision of holistic, value-aware education. This requires more than incremental adaptation—it demands a reconceptualization of the very foundations of language teaching.

This paper examines pathways through which FLE may transcend its instrumentalist legacy. We propose a framework grounded in three mutually reinforcing pillars: Curriculum Reconstruction, which integrates language learning with interdisciplinary content and cultural inquiry; Teacher Agency, which empowers educators as designers of pedagogy and mediators of technology; and Technology Mediation, which reframes AI as a tool for critical engagement rather than substitution. Together, these elements support a shift from language as mere code to language as a gateway to critical global literacy.

In what follows, we elaborate on this model and argue that its implementation may not only safeguard the relevance of foreign language education but also enable it to play a vital role in shaping ethically thoughtful, interculturally competent, and technologically agile graduates.

In the subsequent sections, we elaborate on this tripartite model in detail, demonstrating how its implementation offers a sustainable path forward for foreign language education. We contend that such an approach will not only protect the discipline from declining relevance in an age of artificial intelligence but will also position it to make essential contributions to the formation of future graduates: individuals who are not only linguistically proficient but also ethically reflective, capable of deep intercultural understanding, and good at critically and responsibly using technology in diverse global contexts.

## **2. Literature Review and Conceptual Foundation**

To better understand the challenges and potential pathways for transforming foreign language education (FLE) in the current era, it is essential to review several core concepts and relevant research. This section focuses on three key areas: the “instrumentalist trap,” the New Liberal Arts (NLA) initiative, and technology-enabled education, providing a theoretical basis for the tripartite model proposed in this study.

### **2.1 The “Instrumentalist Trap” and the Limitations of Traditional FLE**

A deep-seated issue in foreign language education has been what applied linguist Claire Kramersch (2014) termed the “instrumentalist trap”—the tendency to treat language merely as a practical tool for communication. This approach overemphasizes the training of discrete skills such as grammar, vocabulary, and translation, while neglecting the role of language as a carrier of culture and a system of meaning. As a result, students may achieve linguistic accuracy but often lack the ability to engage in deep intercultural communication or ethical reflection in real-world contexts.

In China, this issue is particularly pronounced. For years, college English teaching has been heavily oriented around standardized tests such as CET-4 and CET-6 — an approach whose drawbacks outweigh its benefits, as it comes at the expense of students' cultural understanding and critical thinking (Cai Jigang, 2020). With deepening globalization and China’s rising international role, merely training “language technicians” no longer meets the strategic talent needs of the country. FLE must reclaim its humanistic dimension, balancing instrumental and formative aims, and fostering in students a strong cultural identity and the capacity to tell China’s stories effectively.

## **2.2 The New Liberal Arts Initiative and FLE Transformation**

The New Liberal Arts (NLA) construction is a major strategic response of Chinese higher education to the new technological revolution and changing global landscape. Since 2019, the Ministry of Education has vigorously promoted the “Four New” initiatives, with the NLA emphasizing interdisciplinary integration, especially between the humanities and fields such as information technology and artificial intelligence (Ministry of Education, 2020). The New Liberal Arts Construction Declaration clearly calls for innovation in liberal arts education to cultivate talents with cultural confidence, cross-cultural competence, and creative thinking.

In this context, foreign language disciplines can no longer develop in isolation but should actively integrate into the NLA framework. Scholars have proposed the concept of the “New Foreign Languages,” advocating that FLE move beyond language instruction toward a “language-plus” and “plus-language” integrated model. This means that language teaching should combine with area studies, comparative literature, digital humanities, and international communication, enabling students to use language skills to address complex real-world issues. Furthermore, the NLA underscores the importance of value-based education, requiring FLE to engage with global cultures while remaining grounded in the Chinese context, deepening students’ understanding of traditional Chinese culture and socialist core values .

## **2.3 Technology-Enabled Education: Integrating AI into FLE**

The rapid development of generative artificial intelligence (GAI), exemplified by ChatGPT, presents both opportunities and challenges for foreign language teaching. On the one

hand, AI can efficiently handle mechanical tasks such as grammar correction, translation, and writing, alleviating some of the teaching burden and offering students personalized learning support. On the other hand, if AI is used merely as a substitute for teachers or a means to simplify instruction, it may further reinforce the instrumentalist approach and undermine the humanistic aspects of education.

Meaningful integration of technology should emphasize “empowerment” rather than “replacement.” From a digital humanities perspective, technology should serve as a means to enhance humanistic education, not as an end in itself. In the language classroom, AI can be used to create authentic contexts, provide cross-cultural comparative materials, and facilitate project-based learning—all of which support the development of higher-order thinking skills. For example, students can use AI to analyze semantic differences of words across cultures or generate multi-perspective texts on a given topic for critical comparison. In the era of artificial intelligence, teachers will increasingly tend to become designers of personalized learning, human-machine collaborators, innovators and reformers, and emotional enablers to address challenges and adapt to the development of the times (Liu Zhixue, Zhang Gongxun, Zhang Shun, 2025).

#### **2.4 Teacher Agency: The Engine of Sustainable Educational Reform**

Teachers are active agents in educational change (Fullan, 2006). The success of any reform—both in implementation and outcome—depends fundamentally on teachers’ agentic practice. As a crucial professional quality, teacher agency empowers educators to become proactive learners who intentionally plan, execute, and reflect on their actions (Sang Guoyuan, Ye Bixin, & Huang Jiali), thereby influencing not only their instructional practices but also

their long-term professional development. It encompasses more than individual autonomy; it denotes the capacity to align professional actions with moral and educational goals within dynamic environments.

Within foreign language education, teacher agency is pivotal for transcending the “instrumentalist trap.” Without teachers acting as designers, adaptors, and critical mediators, top-down reforms—whether technological or curricular—are unlikely to succeed. Teacher agency is thus not optional but essential to the sustainable implementation of the New Liberal Arts vision. It enables educators to serve as co-creators of interdisciplinary curricula, reflective practitioners of value-based education, and facilitators of technology-enhanced critical learning. This role becomes especially critical in the age of artificial intelligence, where agency ensures that technology is meaningfully integrated into pedagogy rather than dominating it.

By recognizing and strengthening teacher agency, reforms in foreign language education can achieve not only structural implementation but also authentic transformation in classroom practice.

## **2.5 Summary: Toward an Integrated Theoretical Framework**

In conclusion, the transformation of foreign language education involves more than just methodological changes—it represents a fundamental paradigm shift. It requires moving beyond the “instrumentalist trap,” actively responding to the goals of the New Liberal Arts, thoughtfully integrating new technologies such as AI into teaching practices, and—centrally—recognizing and empowering teacher agency as the driving force of sustainable change. At the heart of this transformation is a shift from “language skill training” to “meaning-making and value-based education,” aiming to cultivate a new generation of talents who possess not only

solid language proficiency but also cultural confidence, interdisciplinary vision, and ethical discernment.

The following sections of this paper will build on this theoretical foundation to propose a tripartite model—involving curriculum reconstruction, teacher agency, and technology mediation—as a practical pathway for achieving sustainable development in foreign language education.

### **3. Detailed Framework of the Tripartite Model**

This section delineates the three core components of the proposed model—Curriculum Reconstruction, Teacher Agency, and Technology Mediation—by clarifying their theoretical rationale, key elements, and practical implementation strategies. The model is conceived as an integrated, actionable, and synergistic framework aimed at guiding the transformation of Foreign Language Education (FLE) in accordance with the vision of the New Liberal Arts (NLA) and the demands of an AI-augmented educational landscape.

#### **3.1 Pillar 1: Curriculum Reconstruction – From Language Skills to Cultural Meaning**

Conventional FLE curricula, with their emphasis on discrete linguistic features and standardized testing, have often confined language learning within a narrow instrumentalist paradigm. Curriculum Reconstruction seeks to transcend these limitations by centering instruction on interdisciplinary themes that utilize language as a medium for exploring cultural meanings and global challenges. This reconstruction involves several key dimensions:

First, Courses ought to be structured around substantive themes rather than segregated language skills. Such an approach encourages the integration of language learning with broader fields such as sociology, history, and cultural studies, enabling students to engage with

authentic materials and complex issues while simultaneously developing linguistic proficiencies.

Second, Instruction should facilitate deep engagement with culturally embedded concepts, examining how values and ideas are articulated across different linguistic and cultural contexts. This promotes nuanced intercultural understanding rather than superficial cross-cultural comparison.

Third, Learners' first language and cultural background should be regarded as valuable assets rather than obstacles. Pedagogical tasks can encourage comparative reflection, enhancing metalinguistic awareness and reinforcing bilingual identity through thoughtful cross-linguistic analysis.

### **3.2 Pillar 2: Teacher Agency – The Core of Educational Change**

Sustainable curricular innovation hinges upon teachers who are empowered to exercise professional judgment and pedagogical creativity. Teacher Agency underscores the central role of educators as active designers and facilitators of learning, manifested through several crucial aspects:

Teachers must transition from knowledge transmitters to designers of learning experiences, facilitators of critical discourse, and mediators of intercultural content. This reorientation supports deeper student engagement with complex material and value-laden topics that characterize meaningful language education.

Teacher's professional development should extend beyond conventional language pedagogy to include interdisciplinary collaboration, critical technology integration, and value-based educational approaches. Such preparation equips teachers to lead discussions on ethically

and culturally nuanced subjects.

Educational institutions should provide structural support through curricular autonomy, opportunities for interdisciplinary cooperation, and formal recognition of innovative teaching in professional advancement. These institutional enabling conditions are fundamental for sustaining teacher agency and promoting educational innovation.

### **3.3 Pillar 3: Technology Mediation – AI as a Catalyst for Critical Engagement**

Technology, particularly generative AI, should be positioned not as a substitute for human instruction but as a mediated tool that enhances critical thinking and intercultural learning. This mediation involves several critical considerations:

Digital platforms can serve as gateways to authentic cultural artifacts, such as virtual museum collections or online archives, enriching the classroom with diverse and contextually grounded materials that enhance cultural understanding and language acquisition. Moreover, they can help students to become creators of multimodal projects that synthesize language skills, digital literacy, and interdisciplinary knowledge.

However, rather than leveraging AI for task substitution, students should be encouraged to reflect on the limitations and ethical dimensions of digital tools. They should learn to critically evaluate AI-generated content, identifying cultural biases, rhetorical choices, and ethical implications inherent in machine-generated texts. Therefore, teachers play a crucial role in framing technology use, thereby fostering responsible and critical digital citizenship.

## **4. From Theory to Practice: A Sample Module**

A practical module was designed based on Unit 1: Social Identity from New Explorations in Graduate English, demonstrating how the tripartite model translates into

classroom practice. The module design incorporates teacher agency and technology mediation as inherent components rather than separate elements.

#### **4.1 Learning Objectives**

This module aims to:

Develop critical intercultural awareness through comparing Chinese and Western perspectives on social identity

Enhance digital literacy and ethical reasoning through technology-mediated projects

Strengthen language proficiency via engagement with authentic, content-rich materials

Foster value-based reasoning through examining identity formation in diverse cultural contexts

#### **4.2 Content Selection and Organization**

The core textbook content was expanded through teacher-curated materials that reflect the New Liberal Arts emphasis on interdisciplinary and multi-perspective learning. Teachers selected:

Chinese scholarly articles discussing the concept of collective identity (*jítǐ rèntóng*), western media analyses of digital identity formation, or case studies from both Eastern and Western digital platforms.

This content organization demonstrates teacher agency in adapting materials to achieve specific learning goals while maintaining alignment with textbook themes.

#### **4.3 Learning Activities and Technology Integration**

The activity sequence incorporates technology as an embedded tool for critical engagement:

Text Analysis Using Digital Tools: Students use AI applications to compare identity discourses across cultures, developing critical digital literacy skills.

Multimodal Poster Design: Using platforms like Canva, students create visual representations of identity concepts, blending technical skills with content knowledge.

Online Critical Dialogues: Through structured forum discussions, students debate ethical scenarios using evidence from both textbook and extended materials.

Video Reflection Production: Students create short videos analyzing their identity evolution, practicing digital storytelling while demonstrating comprehension.

#### **4.4 Assessment Design**

Teachers designed multi-dimensional assessments that reflect the integrated nature of learning:

Poster evaluation criteria emphasize both technical execution and intercultural awareness.

Discussion assessments value ethical reasoning and collaborative dialogue skills.

Video reflections are judged on critical thinking depth and language proficiency.

This assessment approach demonstrates how teacher agency shapes evaluation to match learning objectives.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The rapid evolution of generative artificial intelligence (GAI) and the strategic push for New Liberal Arts (NLA) education in China have created both an urgent challenge and a unique opportunity for foreign language education (FLE). This paper has argued that to avoid declining into irrelevance, FLE must consciously escape the "instrumentalist trap"—the reduction of

language to a mere mechanical skill. It is no longer sufficient to teach only the "code" of a language; we must equip students to use that code to "read the world" critically and ethically.

The tripartite model of Curriculum Reconstruction, Teacher Agency, and Technology Mediation offers a practical and sustainable framework for this transformation. As demonstrated in the sample module "Digital Citizenship," these three pillars are not isolated components but function synergistically:

A reconstructed curriculum provides the substantive, interdisciplinary content that gives language learning deeper meaning and purpose.

Teacher agency is the essential human catalyst that designs, adapts, and brings this curriculum to life with expertise and passion.

Technology mediation reframes AI and digital tools from threats into powerful instruments for critical engagement and creative expression.

This approach moves FLE from the periphery to the heart of the university's mission in the 21st century. It aligns perfectly with the goals of the NLA by fostering interdisciplinary thinking, cultural confidence, and value-based learning. It also directly addresses the disruption of AI by focusing on precisely those human-centric skills—critical analysis, ethical reasoning, intercultural understanding, and creative synthesis—that AI cannot replicate.

The journey forward requires a shift in mindset from all stakeholders: administrators must provide supportive structures; teachers must embrace their roles as pedagogical designers and critical guides, and students must be welcomed as active co-creators of knowledge. By embracing this model, foreign language educators can ensure their discipline not only remains

relevant but becomes indispensable in cultivating the thoughtful, globally engaged, and technologically agile graduates that our future demands.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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