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America's Need for a Foreign Language Requirement

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the article's first paragraph.
In the world we live in today, international relations are something that Americans should take extremely seriously. September 11, 2001 completely changed the way Americans see the world and the way the world sees us. Now more than ever, America should be teaching its youth about foreign affairs and governments. The first step in this process would be teaching a foreign language.
America’s Need for a Foreign Language Requirement
By Vanessa Cardinale

Introduction
In the world we live in today, international relations are something that Americans should take extremely seriously. September 11, 2001 completely changed the way Americans see the world and the way the world sees us. Now more than ever, America should be teaching its youth about foreign affairs and governments. The first step in this process would be teaching a foreign language.

The purpose of this report is to show the need for foreign language study and make recommendations for changes in the way it is taught now. I have compiled data on the foreign language standards of two states to show how the requirements are vastly different within our country; I have found statistics of current students who are taking a foreign language and what they are taking; I will outline justifications for taking a foreign language which include personal gains and scholastic impact; I will show what the U.S. could learn from other countries who have tackled this problem; and finally, I will make recommendations.

Many parents think that foreign language is something important that would make a student more well-rounded but do not see a need to make it a requirement. I would like to pose the example of Japanese students to those parents. Japan is the country with which we conduct the most business. In Japan, while foreign language study is not technically required, more than 80% of Japanese students take a foreign language starting at the age of 12. Two foreign languages are required for university graduation (Simon, 1980, p. 85).

Knowing these Japanese standards, and knowing that our students are not required to take a foreign language in some majors to graduate from college, how are our students prepared to do business with the Japanese? Americans tend to have the opinion that no matter where they go, someone will speak English. And if not, there is always the option of using a translator. However, in translation, sometimes a large part of the sentence meaning is lost. If the translator is inexperienced, the situation could create embarrassment for the American businessman or woman. According to former senator Paul Simon, a senior Japanese leader said:

Your nation now faces severe competition in world markets...Why can your continuing education not teach foreign language and customs and cultures of the countries where they may be traveling and working?...Our reps speak the language of the host country and they know it well—and also the customs...Your people must give greater consideration to the study of language and customs of foreign lands or you will lose in the competitive world markets (p. 6).

It could only be to the American businessman or woman’s advantage to learn the language and customs of the country he or she is working with. The above quote proves that countries really appreciate and respect men who make attempts to understand culture and language.

Our school systems aim to provide their students with all the tools necessary to succeed in the real world. I am going to show why foreign language should be one of the subjects students are required to learn in order to be successful.

State Standards and Statistics
One of the problems in foreign language teaching is that no two states have the same requirements. This means that when a graduate of a New York high school and a New York college goes out to look for a job, his or her skill level is different than someone who went all the way through the Nevada school system. The teaching of foreign languages needs to be universally agreed upon and implemented.

We will examine the requirements of those two states: New York and Nevada. New York, in a way, discourages students from continuing on in language study while Nevada gives them incentives to start learning earlier.

In New York, 2 units (the equivalent of 2 years) of study of a language other than English is required by the end of grade 9. Students who begin in grade seven are required to take the New York State Second Language Proficiency Exam at the end of grade 8. In high school, requirements are different. In my high school, students had to take another two years of a foreign language. After 10th grade, language was not required and in fact, students who continued on were able to earn college credit for that language. This was a benefit to students who disliked taking the language because that meant that if they got college credit while in high school, they wouldn't have to take it at all in college. I assert that doing this is a disservice to them. It discourages students from continuing on with their language skills in college.

In Nevada however, the system is much more complicated. Students have a choice of which level they would like to enter in to foreign study. They can enter at the kindergarten level, or grades 3, 5, or 8. Whatever their entry point may be, they are expected to achieve the same proficiency of a student who started the language at a younger age. All students...
must pass a proficiency test at the end of 8th grade or the beginning of their freshman year of high school. This system actually promotes starting at a younger level. If students know they have to pass this proficiency exam and compete with students who have been learning since kindergarten, why wouldn’t they want to start as early as possible? It would be to their advantage to begin language study as early as they could. Information about high school language requirements in Nevada was not available.

In 2000, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages conducted a study on the number of students in different school levels who were taking a foreign language. In 2000, seven million secondary students in America’s public schools were taking a foreign language, representing 33.8% of total enrollment. In America's high schools, just under 6 million (43.8%) were studying a foreign language. This percentage was higher than in 1990 or in 1994 (www.actfl.org). (See Figure 1.)

I compiled this data based on the numbers that came out of the survey. While the increase in numbers of students taking a language is encouraging, even at its highest level in 2000, less than half of all high school students were enrolled. The study also concluded that Spanish is still the most widely studied foreign language, with 30.2% taking it in 2000.

Next to Spanish, French was the most widely taken foreign language. Included on the graph is the number of students who were taking Japanese. You can barely see it on the graph: in 1990 it was .2%; in 1994 it was .4%; and in 2000 it was .5%. Refer back to the point I made in the introduction: Japan is the country we do the most business with, yet less than 10% of our students are attempting to learn their language. (See Figure 2.)

Justifications for Taking a Foreign Language

"The United States can be characterized as the home of the brave, and the land of the monolingual" -Rose Lee Hayden

Any student who has studied abroad for any length of time could attest to the many different benefits a student gains from being immersed in another culture and learning the language. From the personal achievements, to the impact on other studies, to the cultural impact, the benefits go on and on.

Talk to any student who has studied abroad and you will find that the answers are all the same: it had a huge impact on his or her life. I would like to pose my own study abroad experiences as a case study of sorts. I studied in Italy for a month in the summer of 2002. No other single experience that I have had has opened my eyes to new things like my study abroad experience. As far as personal growth experiences, I was able to test my resilience in an environment where I didn’t know the language, didn’t know about the culture or history of the country, and didn’t know anyone besides the 5 other students and one professor that I came with. I was far away from my family, friends, and environment that I was comfortable in. I had to adjust and I think that it was one of the most important experiences of my life.

Connie Peppes, a senior international studies major who was my roommate for the month that we were in Italy, agrees. Connie says that it is times like these where people grow the most. Being in a strange place and being forced to adapt are stressful experiences, but are also a lot of fun at the same time.

Neither Connie nor I spoke any Italian when we arrived in Italy. Connie is fluent in Greek and proficient in French, and I had taken 6 years of Spanish. Having a background in these languages
helped us to pick up Italian quickly. We were thankful for the teaching we received in high school and in our homes because that teaching helped us adjust to our environment more readily.

Not only was I able to test myself while in Italy, I learned so much about Italian culture. I didn't have much appreciation for other cultures until I was exposed to the museums and art galleries of another country.

Something that I thought was interesting was the desire to learn more about the United States after I returned from Italy. Our group spent three days in Rome, the capital of Italy. We toured Rome's museums, monuments, and the ruins of the Roman forum. Surprisingly enough, half of our group had never visited Washington D.C., our own nation's capital. I wanted to learn about our government and more about our nation's history. Upon returning to the United States, I have done some studying on how our justice system works and have been interested in reading about the World Wars and the United States' part in them. These are subjects that were drilled into my head as an elementary school student but they were of no interest to me then. It was not until I learned more about another culture that I wanted to learn more about my own.

Another benefit of learning another language or culture is the social impact it has on the student. Americans tend to be a bit ethnocentric: we believe that since we are the most powerful country in the world, everyone should learn to speak our language and we are surprised to meet people who don't speak English. After all, don't they all want to be like us anyway?

As an American in Europe, I felt ashamed of the ethnocentric views that I previously had and those that I knew most of my fellow Americans had. We expect that immigrants to our country speak English; why not offer to teach other languages to Americans so they can use them when they visit another country? Italians want visitors to speak Italian just as much as Americans want visitors to speak English.

Some Europeans view Americans as lazy and arrogant. We are not doing anything to prove them wrong: we are not requiring our students to learn about other cultures and we are not requiring our students to learn other languages. We are perpetuating the idea that everyone in some part of the world will speak English and therefore it is unnecessary for us to learn his or her language. Sounds like a very arrogant statement, doesn't it? Learning another language not only teaches about the language itself but it also gives an appreciation of the culture and the people of that land. We as Americans tend to think that the world starts in New York and ends in Los Angeles but that is far from the truth.

Long Term Benefits of Studying a Language Other Than English

According to the Texas Foreign Language Association, here are seven other benefits of studying a foreign language:

- The student would use the other language to communicate, interpret, and present information. The more languages the student can do this in, the better off the student is.
- The student gains insight into his or her own culture.
- It is easier to learn a third language.
- Knowledge and understanding of other cultures makes them a more well-rounded person.
- SAT scores are higher in verbal and math sections. Each additional year of study increases the scores further.
- Students develop higher level thinking skills like inductive and deductive reasoning, and problem solving skills.
- The student has access to more jobs due to the knowledge of a foreign language. Careers based on language like teaching, translating, and interpreting are opened up only to those who have a background in the language (www3.Baylor.edu/TFLA)

Foreign language should not be look upon as just another subject, but as a subject that will enhance all of the other disciplines as well.

What the United States Can Learn From Other Countries

In December of 2000, the U.S. Department of Education's Comparative Information on Improving Education Practice by the Center for Applied Linguistics prepared a survey of 22 other countries to see what conclusions it could draw for U.S. schools (www.nysaflt.org). The following are a few of their suggestions:

- Start language education early. Most of the countries in the survey began language instruction in elementary school. In the United States, most schools do not even offer a foreign language until middle school or high school. I spoke with high school Spanish teacher Theresa Mazzurco, who teaches 10th and 12th grade Spanish at Jamestown High School in Jamestown, N.Y. "Start a foreign language when you are fairly young, and the younger the better," she says, "not only because you are more willing to try to speak it because you're less embarrassed, but also because your pronunciation is more apt to be native-like if you have a good model." Mazzurco says that when we are born, we can pronounce every single sound in the world, but as we get older we lose that ability. Thus, starting language earlier increases the chances of fluency.
- Improve teacher education. Naturally students cannot learn unless their teacher has had proper
training. The U.S. should look into how other countries prepare their teachers for the classroom.

✓ Develop appropriate language assessment instruments. In the U.S. today we have proficiency exams that students must pass, but educators need to put more emphasis on these exams. We cannot know if we are achieving our goals without proper assessment procedures.

✓ Designate foreign language as a core subject. This is essential for a successful program. In almost all the countries with a successful language department, foreign language has as much emphasis as math or reading.

These are just a few suggestions but probably the most important one is to designate foreign language as a core subject. I will outline this in greater detail when I make my recommendations.

Recommendations

"We must actively promote our participation in the growing world intellectual culture or we will become increasingly irrelevant to it"—Richard D. Lambert

So what do you do now that you know all of this information? Begin writing letters to members of Congress. Tell them the information you know and ask them to support legislation in favor of increasing foreign language requirements. Organize community gatherings to increase support for languages. Organize foreign language nights at your schools. Do anything that would raise awareness and help others understand the ways that foreign languages can enrich one's life.

I have compiled a few of my own recommendations based on the information I have provided you. Follow them if you feel that they would be effective in your own communities. Otherwise, create other strategies that will work in your area. Here are my recommendations:

✓ No student should be admitted to college without foreign language exposure and none should graduate without it. Students should have a minimum of two years exposure in high school to prepare them for college. Once in college, two years (minimum) of language should be a requirement to prepare the student for the real world.

✓ No student should get a degree in a foreign language without studying abroad first. There is no better way to become fluent in a language than to be immersed in the culture for a length of time. Other majors are required to prove that they are “fluent” in their field; why not make language majors prove the same?

✓ As interest in language heightens, more than two years of study should be required. The more a student is exposed, the more he or she will learn. Two years is just a minimum.

✓ High schools should offer study abroad trips to students who display academic excellence in their foreign language. For a student who is passionate about language, there is no greater joy than to be able to speak with the natives and visit the places that he or she has been studying. A trip would also be incentive to students who are struggling with the language. If they have something to work towards, they would study harder and try to get better grades.

✓ Families should invite foreign exchange student into their homes. Parents of children who are interested in other cultures should consider this as an excellent learning opportunity. Not only does the family enrich and teach the exchange student, but the student can also teach the family about his or her culture and customs. This is a way of bringing that culture to the student, instead of the student having to travel to that country.

✓ Once you’ve finished letters to your own Congressmen, continue writing to all members of Congress. The squeaky wheel gets the oil! If this is something you are passionate about, persistence pays off!

✓ Write a letter to the editor. Inform your community about what you are trying to do and other supporters will emerge.

The key to making changes is persistence. If you really believe that the future of our world is in learning about other cultures, tell the people who can make the necessary decisions to bring about change.

Conclusion

With the war on terrorism and a war in Iraq, Americans know that international relations are extremely important. But what happens to the idea of foreign affairs when war is not being pushed in our faces? Americans lose the spirit when there’s no time of crisis. We cannot lose sight of the fact that foreign language is important and vital to the United States’ position of world super power. We cannot possibly compete with other countries if we do not understand them, no matter how much money or power we have.

The rise in students enrolled in a foreign language is encouraging but not good enough. Students need to start this process earlier and continue on with it longer throughout their academic careers. The benefits of language study are overwhelming: from scholastic benefits, socio-cultural impacts, to personal gains, the list goes on and on. The best way for students to understand this is studying abroad; being immersed in another culture solidifies the classroom learning experience.

The United States should look at other countries to see how they teach foreign languages. Most
countries have been successful and the U.S. could pick up some valuable tips.

Most importantly, our government isn't going to change a thing unless they know about the demand for languages. Voice your opinion. America needs to learn foreign languages if we intend to keep the prosperous status that we have today.

References


Websites
