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THE U.S. FOREIGN LANGUAGE DEFICIT

Strategies for Maintaining a
Competitive Edge in a
Globalized World

Kathleen Stein-Smith



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PREFACE

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

In an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, facing global issues that require global solutions, it is increasingly important—essential for our survival, in fact—that we communicate, and that we communicate effectively.

According to the United Nations (UN) website, “The correct interpretation and translation of these six languages, in both spoken and written form, is very important to the work of the Organization, because this enables clear and concise communication on issues of global importance.”

It goes on to affirm, “Multilingualism enables communication between the UN’s linguistically and culturally diverse Member States within the meeting rooms and halls of the UN. By promoting tolerance, multilingualism also ensures increased participation of all Member States in the Organization’s work, as well as greater effectiveness, better outcomes and more involvement.”

Americans are among the least likely to speak another language. The United States’ foreign language deficit impacts our economic and national security, affecting both individuals and our society as a whole.

This deficit affects our ability to effectively navigate the globalized world and our own multicultural and multilingual society. In addition, individuals without foreign language skills and knowledge of other cultures are often not able to enjoy cultural and entertainment events and the experience of travel abroad firsthand.

Many career opportunities require or prefer foreign language and intercultural skills, leaving many U.S. jobs unfilled, or filled by workers from other parts of the world with the desired skill set.

We should communicate the value of foreign language skills, especially to young people, as a career asset, and offer the opportunity for them to learn foreign languages beginning at an early age and to continue to proficiency and even fluency.

We can act as individuals—in our families and communities, in the workplace, and through our elected officials to effect change. Educators—in the classroom and through research, can create and deliver the best instructional theory and material for learners of all ages and backgrounds. Government officials, agencies, and departments can develop policies to empower students, prospective workers, and citizens to develop foreign language skills. Businesses can facilitate foreign language learning on site or through funding by their employees. Identifying other foreign language stakeholders—potential partners—is an essential first step.

Most importantly, we can work together—as parents, educators, public officials, and business leaders—in what has been referred to as the language enterprise partnership to support foreign language learning.

The “Many Languages One World” (MLOW) Essay Contest and Global Youth Forum, New York City’s French *révolution bilingue*, and the British Academy’s Languages Programme and partnership with *The Guardian*, are just a few of the wonderful examples of language enterprise stakeholder partnerships.

We can work together to build motivation to get students into the classroom and keep them there, and we can support immersion and heritage language programs to increase foreign language achievement.

The time is now, and the need is urgent. Globalization has resulted in a vastly more interconnected world, and yet only 25% of Americans speak another language. College and university enrollment in a course in a language other than English has fallen to 8.1%, the lowest-ever percentage reported, while virtually all students in the European Union (EU) and beyond study one or more languages beginning at an early age.

Getting the word out to stakeholder groups and to the general population, and present and potential foreign language learners is critical. Using the best in research on foreign languages and foreign language education, strategic social marketing, and influence from a perspective that embraces methods, including but not limited to social media, the campaign will include multiple participants and methods, or mini-campaigns, to best reach populations with diverse reasons for studying foreign languages.

It is especially important to highlight the benefits of learning another language. Foreign language learning and foreign language skills have many benefits. One of the most significant is the impact of foreign language on intelligence and ability in a variety of settings. A frequently cited circumstance is the influence of foreign language skill on standardized test scores.

Knowledge of more than one language has also been shown to increase our ability to multitask and to prioritize multiple tasks. Knowledge and regular use of one or more foreign languages have been demonstrated to effectively improve mental acuity, stave off dementia, and improve memory function. Multilingual persons have also been demonstrated to have better observational skills and to make more rational decisions. In addition, knowledge of one or more foreign languages tends to make us more aware of the grammar and structure of our own native language.

At the end of the day, it is important to remember—and to remind all our stakeholders—that foreign language is both a personal and workplace skill. It is necessary to develop and expand curriculum and related programs that will empower our students to develop the level of foreign language skills needed in the workplace, and to develop specific career pathways for students into the language-services sector—which is predicted to increase faster than average and is worth more than \$25 billion a year in the U.S. alone—and related sectors with literally millions of career opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

Americans are among the least likely in the world to speak another language. This U.S. foreign language deficit negatively impacts our national and economic security, our ability to effectively navigate the global workplace and our multicultural communities, our individual career possibilities, and our ability to enjoy travel abroad and cultural pursuits to the fullest.

This book examines the extent of the U.S. foreign language deficit, its impact, and what can and should be done to address it, and the stakeholders and partners in the campaign for foreign languages.

It explores the economic impact of a resurgence of foreign language on the U.S. economy and the next steps needed to develop specific career pathways that will both meet the current and future needs of government, business, and industry, and empower foreign language learners through curriculum and career preparation.

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PART I

The Extent and Impact of the
U.S. Foreign Language Deficit

The Current Status of Languages in the United States

Abstract According to a Gallup poll, only 25% of Americans possess the ability to conduct a conversation in a language other than English. According to the Modern Language Association (MLA), only 8.1% of U.S. college and university students are enrolled in a course in a language other than English, and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) reports that only 18.5% of K-12 students study a foreign language. The United States has no official language.

Keywords *Lingua franca* • Foreign language deficit • Monolingualism • Official language • Celebrities • Loan words

According to a Gallup poll, only 25% of Americans possess the ability to conduct a conversation in a language other than English. When immigrants, their children, and other heritage language speakers are subtracted, that leaves 10% of Americans with foreign language skills.

According to the Modern Language Association (MLA), only 8.1% of United States college and university students are enrolled in a course in a language other than English, and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) reports that only 18.5% of K-12 students study a foreign language.

On the other hand, a recent *Eurobarometer* survey reported that 56% of the respondents reported that they felt comfortable holding a conversation in another language, 28% felt comfortable conversing in two

other languages, and 11% were able to hold a conversation in two or more additional languages.

The reasons for this U.S. and—to some extent—global anglophone foreign language deficit have been attributed to a variety of causes, ranging from the rise of English as a global *lingua franca* to American parochialism.

Determining the reason(s) for the lack of interest and/or achievement in foreign languages is important in developing an effective response and in successfully addressing this foreign language deficit, and multiple reasons may require a multifaceted strategic social marketing campaign, targeting distinct subsets of potential foreign language learners.

However, the reality is that many—possibly even most—Americans do not even give foreign languages more than a passing thought on a typical day, and if they do, it is typically the fleeting thought that speakers of other languages should be learning and speaking English. Reflecting this, fewer than half of the 50 states have a foreign language requirement for high school graduation.

Confident in the seemingly global reach of English and historically focused on local, regional, and national events, Americans are quietly—and effectively—being left behind and marginalized in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world. Global mobility is growing at an increasingly rapid pace, including students and professionals, and today's global talent is seemingly effortlessly multilingual, with a repertory of linguistic and cultural knowledge and skills, typically including global languages such as French and English, international languages such as Spanish, and locally and regionally important languages such as Portuguese, German, Russian, Chinese, and so on.

On the other hand, even a relatively internationally minded American is likely to lack more than a superficial knowledge of one additional language, typically Spanish, and Global/International Studies undergraduate major programs are unlikely to require a foreign language beyond the intermediate level, which does not generally represent business proficiency, when there is a foreign language requirement at all.

The importance of foreign language skills is sometimes less than noticeable to many of us in our daily routine, which typically may not include the need to use another language, and it is important to remember that most Americans, even in an interconnected, globalized world where travel is relatively within reach financially for many, still do not have a passport.

However, employers are looking for those with foreign language skills. In fact, the gap between demand and supply of foreign language skills is growing, and the reasons for this include the increasing importance of exports, especially of services, as part of the continuing economic recovery; a burgeoning languages services sector; widespread government need for foreign language skills; and the search for global talent with foreign language knowledge and intercultural skills by multinational corporations. Despite this increasing importance of foreign language skill in the workplace, there has not been an equivalent resurgence of foreign language learning among current and prospective workers.

Our safety and security also depend on foreign language knowledge. Whether the discussion revolves around the need for foreign language skills in government agencies at the federal, state, and local level—in social services agencies, courts, hospitals, law enforcement, the military, the diplomatic service, and so on, or whether it is a question of the ability of a monolingual English-speaking American to develop a broader understanding of global issues without being able to understand and read about other worldviews expressed in other languages, foreign languages are essential to our individual safety and security, and to that of our society. At the same time, there is a worsening shortage of qualified foreign language teachers, resulting in part from the precipitous decline in foreign language majors in the 1970s and 80s.

On another level, our personal, individual quality of life is enhanced by knowledge of other languages and cultures, and diminished by the lack thereof. Americans are relatively less likely to be able to appreciate literature, film, and vocal music in the original; to be less likely to be able to connect with locals during travel; and in conversation, the monolingual American is less likely to be aware of the current issues, history, and cultural figures of another culture than a comparable international.

To add to the factors militating against American monolingualism, neuroscience tells us that bilingualism, the frequent use of more than one language, helps us to make more rational decisions and to stave off dementia, and educational research tells us that knowledge of another language is an asset both to bilingual students mastering English and to English-speaking Americans learning a foreign language.

While this lack of intercultural literacy may seem at first only disheartening, it is actually a cause for serious concern for all of us, putting our national and economic security at risk, adding a career disadvantage, rather

than an asset, to our resume or curriculum vitae (CV), and making it more difficult for us to be globally fluent.

And no global *lingua franca* lasts forever. Latin, Spanish, and French have played this role for a time, and history tells us that English is likely to be supplanted at some future date, or perhaps to evolve into a simplified global English, sometimes referred to as “Globish.” This uncertain future of English in a globalized world is yet another reason for all of us to be concerned about the lack of foreign language skills in the U.S.

The U.S. foreign language deficit, deeply rooted in our history and culture, has worsened over recent decades, at a time when globalization has made the need to address it all the more urgent.

An example of the worsening of deficit is the decline in the percentage of postsecondary students enrolled in a course in a language other than English—from 16% in 1960, to 8.1%, according to the most recent MLA Enrollment Survey available. The absolute numbers may not have decreased, but the percentage of educated Americans likely to have some foreign language knowledge has decreased by 50% in the last 50 years, just as postcolonialism has given way to globalization, and increased interconnectedness has increased the need for foreign language skills.

It is important that we take action—as individuals among our family, friends, and communities; as professionals within the workplace and within our professional associations; as educators within our schools, school districts, and institutions of higher learning; as public intellectuals by speaking out for foreign languages; as citizens by voting, advocating, and being candidates for public office; and as strategists by planning a multifaceted strategic social marketing campaign for foreign languages.

The time is now—to work together to bring about the urgently needed resurgence of foreign languages—for ourselves, our careers, and our society, but most importantly, for our future and for that of our children.

LANGUAGES IN THE UNITED STATES

Many people believe that English is the official language of the U.S., but it is not. The U.S. has no *de jure* official language, but English is the *de facto* language for government, business, and social use. In fact, a widely circulated urban legend, the Muhlenberg Legend, has it that German had barely missed by one vote in the House of Representatives becoming the official language of the U.S..

Many languages co-exist in the U.S., with different languages more predominant at different periods in history. French, English, and Spanish in the U.S. are part of a postcolonial legacy of the First French Colonial Empire, the British Empire, and the Spanish Empire. Other languages, at times including the three postcolonial languages, have been brought to the U.S. by groups of immigrants over the centuries and into the current era. According to the U.S. Census, more Americans listed German ancestry than any other: over 46 million individuals in 2014. However, although German is the third most widely studied language in the U.S., with just under 400,000 K-12 public school students enrolled, according to the *ACTFL Enrollment Survey*, relatively few Americans speak German today, with just over 1 million Americans over the age of five listed in the Census report *Language Use in the United States*.

According to *Language Use in the United States*, according to responses to the U.S. Census 2011 American Community Survey, over 60 million, or one in five Americans over the age of five, speak a language other than English in the home. In fact, 350 languages are spoken within the U.S.

Other than English, Spanish is by far the most widely spoken language in the U.S., with just over 37.5 million listed as speaking Spanish in the home. In descending order, Chinese, French, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Korean, and German round out the list of languages, each with more than 1 million speakers listed.

When considered in terms of states, in 2014 *Slate* published several very illustrative maps based on the Census. The first, entitled “Most Commonly Spoken Languages Other than English,” highlighted the predictable prevalence of Spanish, with only few states—Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Louisiana (French); North Dakota (German); Hawaii (Tagalog); and Alaska (Yupik)—showing a language other than Spanish ranking second. However, the second map, entitled “Most Commonly Spoken Language Other than English or Spanish,” presented a much more varied picture, with German the most prevalent in 16 states; French the most widely spoken in 11 states and French Creole in a 12th state; Vietnamese in four states; Tagalog in three states; Korean, Italian, and Navajo in two states; and Dakota, Hmong, Russian, Chinese, Portuguese, Yupik, Arabic, and Polish in one state each.

Comparing the most frequently spoken languages in the U.S. (Spanish, Chinese, French, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Korean, and German) with the foreign languages most studied in K-12 public schools (Spanish, French, German, Latin, Japanese, Chinese, and Russian), the match is not complete. If college and university foreign language enrollments are examined,