

The U.S. Foreign Language Deficit and What We Can Do about It As Foreign Language Educators

by Kathleen Stein-Smith

Introduction

In a globalized world, and in our own multicultural communities, foreign languages are in the news and are part of the public, as well as the scholarly, conversation, most specifically in terms of the lack of foreign language skills among Americans. The references range from the oft-told joke about the monolingual American to references in the business and financial press and media concerning the lack of language skills among Americans involved in international/global business. Research reports and scholarly articles have examined the need for those with foreign language skills in industry and government as well as enrollments statistics and initiatives.

Students with foreign language skills tend to score better on standardized tests, and people who speak a foreign language tend to earn more. Yet only 18.5% of U.S. K-12 students study a foreign language. Foreign languages skills are important, and they will only grow more important in a globalized world. However, relatively few American students are fluent, or even proficient, in another language. Educators can play an important role in effectively addressing the U.S. foreign language deficit.

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

According to a Gallup Poll, only 25% of Americans responded that they can hold a conversation in a language other than English. If recent immigrants and heritage language speakers are deducted from this, the number of monolingual Americans able to converse in another language hovers at around 10% (Web).

According to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), only 18.5% of K-12 students in the US study a foreign language (Web). According to the Modern Language Association (MLA), only 8.6% of college and university students are enrolled in a course in a language other than English (Web). According to the National Council of State Supervisors for Languages (NCSSFL), many states do not even have a foreign language requirement for high school graduation (Web).

On the other hand, 56% of EU citizens responded that they are able to hold a conversation in a language other than their mother tongue, and 28% stated that they are able to hold a conversation in two additional languages. Approximately 10% responded that they are able to hold a conversation in three additional languages. In Europe, students generally are required to learn one or more foreign languages in school.

The lack of foreign language skills among Americans impacts our global competitiveness, and consequently, our economic security. Moreover, the U.S. foreign language deficit impacts not only our economic and national security, but also our individual careers and our ability to function effectively as global citizens.

The following articles and reports are among the many that highlight this. From the perspective of language education and language policy, Terrence Wiley, President of the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), reflects on the importance of foreign language skills for the long-term American economy recovery in *A "Languages for Jobs" Initiative: Policy Innovation Memorandum No. 24* (2012). In a post to the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) blog, *Renewing America, Foreign Languages and U.S. Economic Competitiveness* (2012), Alden examines the relationship of foreign language skills in the U.S. to our national security through our economic competitiveness. The Language Flagship report, *What Business Wants: Language Needs in the 21st Century* (2009), which includes input from representatives of the business community, demonstrates the importance of foreign language skills in U.S. business

The lack of foreign language skills impacts our national security, and this has been confirmed and examined by government reports and Senate hearings.

The following are among the most illustrative and revelatory. In the Senate report, *A National Security Crisis: Foreign Language Capabilities in the Federal Government* (2012) -- Senate Hearing, the national security implications of the lack of foreign language skills among U.S. government employees are examined. An earlier report, *Closing the Language Gap: Improving the Federal Government's Foreign Language Capabilities* (2010) -- Senate Hearing, discussed ways of increasing foreign language skills in U.S. government agencies and departments.

International Education and Foreign Languages: Keys to Security America's Future (2007), and *Education for Global Leadership: The Importance of International Studies and Foreign Language Education for U.S. Economic and National Security* (2006) built upon the findings of the earlier NAFSA report, *Securing America's Future: Global Education for a Global Age* (2002); *The National Security Language Initiative* (2006), and demonstrated the link between effective foreign language education and our economic and national security.

The Defense Language Transformation Roadmap (2005-) has driven efforts and initiatives within the U.S. military to improve and to more effectively utilize needed foreign language skills.

The lack of foreign language skills also impacts the individual in terms of intellectual abilities, career opportunities, and the ability to effectively navigate our local multicultural and multilingual communities.

Research has demonstrated that regular use of a foreign language increases our ability to multitask, may stave off the onset of dementia, strengthens our decision-making ability, and is closely correlated with higher SAT scores among students.

Data confirms that the lack of foreign language skills among Americans also impacts the career and professional opportunities available to individuals. There are many career opportunities that require foreign language skills and are not available to Americans who only speak English. According to the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, the median salary for interpreters and translators was \$45,430 per year, the number of jobs available was 63,600, and the job outlook 2012-2022 was predicted to increase by 46%, much faster than average. According to CareerBuilder, executives are much more likely to possess foreign language skills than the general population or workforce.

The U.S. Foreign Language Deficit and Foreign Language Educators -- What We Can Do: Best Practices and Advocacy

Foreign language educators can effectively address the foreign language deficit by learning from best practices here in the U.S. and around the world, by learning from research, and by becoming advocates for foreign language learning.

Books, journals, magazines, publications from professional associations, and government reports are among the sources from which educators can learn and draw inspiration. The following are among the best examples of writings on foreign language advocacy. *What We Can Learn from Foreign Language Teaching in Other Countries* (2001) is one of the most inspirational articles on learning from best practices around the world. *Promoting a Language Proficient Society: What You Can Do* (2000) examines what educators can do, within their local and professional communities, to increase foreign language skills. The MLA report, *Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World* (2007) discusses the role of higher education in fostering K-16 foreign language skills.

Best practices in foreign language education may be observed at all levels in all types of institutions, and can be observed and described in the literature. The following are among examples of best practices in foreign language education.

The Concordia College (MN) Language Villages program, reflective of the institutional commitment to global education, offers cultural immersion to children and young people, and also to entire families. The Juniata College Language in Motion program is a multi-faceted initiative that includes participation by international students and by students returning from study abroad in outreach programs to local schools and encourages other institutions to establish similar programs. Middlebury College Language Schools, with the tag line, "Life doesn't come with subtitles," will observe the centennial of the German School in 2015 and are best known for the trademarked Language Pledge, immersion instruction, and the *sui generis* Doctor of Modern Languages (DML) program.

The Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center, generally open to military, government, and law enforcement personnel, is known for its high percentage of native language instructors and long hours of class and homework.

Mormon Missionary Training Centers offer foreign language training for prospective missionaries. In just a matter of weeks, motivated learners acquire the foreign language skills needed for their religious mission.

Utah and Delaware have launched ambitious world language immersion programs that other states can learn from. The Utah World Languages and Dual Language Immersion programs offer dual language immersion in Chinese, French, German, Portuguese or Spanish, and the Delaware World Language Immersion Programs offer immersion in either Spanish or Mandarin Chinese.

ELS Educational Language Services, Inc., a division of Berlitz Corporation, offers an example of foreign language education in settings worldwide and of private sector commitment to international education through its "Many Languages One World" (MLOW) program in collaboration with the United Nations Academic Impact (UNAI).

There are many examples of effective advocacy for foreign languages and for foreign language education at the local, state, and, national level, including campaigns by educators, parent groups, and local citizens.

Professional associations, including the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the Modern Language Association (MLA), and associations of specific foreign language education professionals, such as the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP), the American Association of Teachers of German (AATG), the American Association of Teachers of Italian (AATI), etc, and -- of course -- the American Association of Teachers of French (AATF), are proactive and effective advocates for foreign language education, and the Joint National Committee for Languages and the National Council for Languages and International Studies (JNCL-NCLIS) serves as a national advocate, representing many constituencies from across the language enterprise. The Northeast Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (NECTFL) is an example of the many state and regional organizations advocating and promoting foreign languages and foreign language education. The outreach program to schools sponsored by the American Translators Association (ATA) is an example of collaboration between education and business. The AATF has been active in advocacy and promotion for French and for French language education and is a founding member and board member of JNCL-NCLIS.

AATF Commission on Advocacy, with Founding Chair, Robert "Tennessee Bob" Peckham, maintains a crisis response team to support and assist teachers whose programs are in danger, and the Commission's initiatives include the Advocacy Depot, with general and localized support materials. Most recently, Dr. Peckham has developed a "K-12 First-Responder Kit." The Advocacy Wiki, chaired by Dr. Margot Steinhart, has also developed materials for use by teachers.

Among U.S. foreign language educators, Dr. Robert Peckham, "Tennessee Bob" and Chair of the AATF Commission on Advocacy, Dr. Mary Risner, Associate Director of the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Florida. She is also founder and Executive Director of the Network of Business Language Educators (NOBLE), and Dr. William P. Rivers, Executive Director of JNCL-NCLIS, are examples of proactive and effective advocacy for foreign languages and for foreign language education.

Noteworthy advocates for foreign languages and for foreign language education from the private sector include Mark W. Harris, CEO and President of Berlitz Corporation, which includes ELS Educational Services, a Berlitz Company, sponsor of the Many Languages One World (MLOW) Essay Contest and Global Youth Forum, Nataly Kelly, VP of Marketing at Smartling and author of *Found in Translation: How Language Shapes Our Lives and Transforms the World* (2012), and Benny Lewis, the Irish polyglot author of *fluentin3months.com* and the book, *Fluent in 3 Months* (2014).

Effective examples of foreign language advocacy include the following: "Many Languages One World;" and TEDx -- "Why We Care! – Global Challenges and Realities" at Fairleigh Dickinson University.

ELS Educational Services (ELS) and the United Nations Academic Impact (UNAI) announced in October 2013 the "Many Languages One World" Essay Contest and Global Youth Forum (MLOW), a global essay contest for full-time college and university students on the importance of multilingualism in a global world, the condition being that the essay be written in one of the six

official languages of the UN and not in the writer's native language. Essays were submitted by over 1,400 students from over 120 countries, and in June 2014, 60 winners (10 for each of the six official languages of the UN) were brought to New York to present at the UN (Web).

MLOW was a wonderful, and unprecedented, example of the importance of foreign languages. This author was honored to have been invited to evaluate the winners from among the finalists via Skype interviews *en francais*, to serve as French language facilitator, to assist the students as they prepared for their UN presentations, and to accompany them to the UN.

My TEDx talk, *The U.S. Foreign Language Deficit and Our Economic and National Security: What It Is, Why It Matters, and What We Can Do about It*, was part of the program -- "Why We Care! – Global Challenges and Realities" at Fairleigh Dickinson University on September 21, 2013. This talk defined the U.S. foreign language deficit, demonstrated its importance, and explored actions steps possible for citizens, educators, and institutions. The worldwide reach of TED talks, translated into many languages, offers an unparalleled to launch, or to sustain, the conversation on a topic.

The Campaign for Foreign Languages -- Leadership and Change Management Strategies

The successful campaign for foreign languages needs to be informed by the research and best practices, but also needs to utilize the most current theory and practice in leadership and change management.

John Kotter's work on the eight steps of change management and the importance of "a sense of urgency" would frame the campaign, which would be driven by the work of Clayton Christensen on disruptive innovation. Foreign languages and foreign language education, which have been disrupted by declining enrollments, must in turn disrupt the disruptor, or must at least compete with other disciplines for funding and for students, according to Michael Porter's theory of incremental competitive strategy.

The future of foreign language in the United States lies in the realm of blue ocean strategy, as theorized by Kim and Mauborgne, the creation of new interest in foreign languages where none has previously existed. This is the heart of the matter, and the most problematic area to address.

Successful Campaigns for Foreign Languages beyond Our Borders -- The European Union and the United Kingdom

Multilingualism, a core value of the European Union (EU), is demonstrated by its number of official languages (24) and by its commitment to the policy of plurilingualism, often referred to as "mother tongue plus two." Within the EU, foreign language study generally begins at an earlier age and with more consistency than it does typically in the United States. The Erasmus program builds on primary and secondary school foreign language study and encourages EU university students to study abroad with the goal of developing a transnational workforce, with jobseekers comfortable working in a variety of national settings.

The EU actively promotes language learning, most visibly through its annual European Day of Languages, in September.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Foreign Language (CEFR) drives languages instruction and assessment across the EU, and *Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe* provides detailed data on enrollments, outcomes, teacher qualifications, etc. across the EU. The UK and Ireland, ranking last in terms of foreign language skills, within the EU, have launched initiatives to improve foreign language skills.

It is interesting to note that Americans are generally considered to be among the world's most reluctant foreign language learners, followed closely by other native Anglophones in Great Britain, Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand, with the belief that English is the global *lingua franca* and lack of interest in other cultures and their languages often given as reasons.

While the lack of foreign language skills among native English speakers the world over has been a source for concern, the British have effectively addressed foreign languages in the schools, launching a new national curriculum requiring foreign languages in the primary grades in September 2014. In fact, in 2011, the British Academy for the Humanities and Social Sciences, launched a four-year campaign for languages, scheduled to conclude with the release of the report, *Born Global: Rethinking Language Policy for 21st Century Britain* (scheduled for July 2015).

The campaign has included a multi-year high-profile series of articles, *The Case for language learning*, in the *Guardian*. The Language Festival, launched in 2013, has been scheduled again for 2014.

Two major reports have been associated with this program. *Languages: The State of the Nation* (2013) examined the need for foreign language skills in the UK, and the relatively lower level of foreign language skills as compared to other nations.

Another report, *Lost for Words: The Need for Languages in UK Diplomacy and Security* (2013), specifically examined the need for increased foreign language skills for national security.

In addition, the annual *Confederation of British Industry CBI/Pearson Survey* confirms the importance of foreign language as a global and business competency.

Earlier reports, such as *Languages for All: Languages for Life: A Strategy for England* (2000), and *Higher Ambitions: The future of universities in a knowledge economy* (2009), established the background for the current conversation.

Conclusions and Future Directions -- "Will We Be Tongue-Tied or Fluent?" (Simon, 1980)

Although foreign language educators had written of concerns over foreign enrollments as early as the 1940s, the contemporary conversation on foreign languages in the United States began with the 1979 report of the Presidential Commission, *Strength through Wisdom*, followed in 1980 by Senator Paul Simon's *The Tongue-Tied American* (1980), as foreign language enrollments declined precipitously. The current conversation on the lack of foreign language skills among American began in response to 9/11, supported by reports from government and industry, and by Senate Hearings.

However, while foreign language enrollments have stabilized, and even increased in some areas, they have not kept pace with globalization. Much still remains to be done, and we can learn from each other, at conferences, through the literature and best practices, and through successful

campaigns for foreign languages around the world. Motivation remains an unresolved issue at all levels, with native English speakers in the U.S. and around the world reluctant foreign language learners, and with school districts and institutions of higher learning reluctant to establish foreign language requirements or to enforce existing requirements. The title of a 2014 article in the *Guardian*, "Wanting it enough: why motivation is key to language learning," is revelatory.

In order to increase community awareness of both the need for foreign language skills and the benefits of learning a foreign language, as well as the pleasure and enjoyment of the process of learning and the ability to interact with others in *their* language, foreign language educators can and should participate in and support a wide range of community and extra/co-curricular activities

This is especially important as foreign language face increasing pressure as part of the curriculum at all levels.

Foreign language educators can certainly develop experiential learning in the local language community, sponsor a "Film, Food, and Fiction" event highlighting a specific language or group of languages and cultures on campus or at school, host and support Library Language Tables and other informal venues to create and develop interest in foreign language learning. The list of possibilities is limited only by our own creativity, imagination, and commitment.

FAIRLEIGH DICKINSON UNIVERSITY

Works Cited

- Alden, Edward. "Foreign Languages and U.S. Economic Competitiveness." *Renewing America*. 26 June 2012. <http://blogs.cfr.org/renewing-america/2012/06/26/foreign-languages-and-u-s-economic-competitiveness/>. Web. 1 September 2014.
- American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). *Foreign Language Enrollments in K-12 Public Schools*. 12 November 2012. <http://www.actfl.org/search/node/enrollment%20survey>. Web. 1 September 2014.
- Brecht, Richard, et al. *Languages for All?: The Anglophone Challenge*. September 2013. http://www.casl.umd.edu/sites/default/files/LFA_WhitePaper_fnl.pdf Web. 2 September 2014.
- British Academy. *Languages: The State of the Nation*. 2013. http://www.britac.ac.uk/policy/State_of_the_Nation_2013.cfm. Web. 1 September 2014.
- . *Lost for Words: The Need for Languages in UK Diplomacy and Security*. 2013. http://www.britac.ac.uk/policy/Lost_For_Words.cfm. Web. 1 September 2014.
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. "Interpreters and Translators." <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/media-and-communication/interpreters-and-translators.htm>. Web. 1 September 2014.
- Christensen, Clayton. *The Innovator's Dilemma*. New York: HarperBusiness, 1997. Print.
- College Board. *2013 College Bound Seniors Total Group Report* © 2013, Table 1: Overall Mean Scores and Table 17: Foreign and Classical Languages <http://media.collegeboard.com/digitalServices/pdf/research/2013/TotalGroup-2013.pdf>
- Committee for Economic Development (CED). *Education for Global Leadership: The Importance of International Studies and Foreign Language Education for U.S. Economic and National Security*. 17 May 2006. <https://www.ced.org/reports/single/education-for-global-leadership> Web. 1 September 2014.
- Confederation of British Industry. CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Survey 2013. *Changing the Pace*. 2013. http://www.cbi.org.uk/media/2119176/education_and_skills_survey_2013.pdf Web. 1 September 2014.
- Council of Europe. *Common European Framework of Reference for Foreign Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/framework_en.pdf

- Department for Business Innovations and Skills (BIS). *Higher Ambitions: The future of universities in a knowledge economy*. 2009. <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/9465/>. Web. 1 September 2014.
- Department for Education. *Languages for All: Languages for Life: A Strategy for England*. 2000. <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151715/http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DfESLanguagesStrategy.pdf>. Web. 1 September 2014.
- Dreifus, Claudia. "The Bilingual Advantage." *New York Times* 31 May 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/31/science/31conversation.html?_r=0. Web 22 Mar. 2015.
- European Commission. *Europeans and Their Languages*. 2006. http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_243_en.pdf. Web. 1 September 2014. 8.
- Eurydice. *Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe*. http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/key_data_series/143en.pdf. Web 22 March 2015.
- Hislop, Samuel B. *How Do Mormon Missionaries Learn Foreign Languages: NPR Explains*. 9 June 2014. <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/npr-mormon-missionary-language-training>. Web. 2 September 2014.
- Kelly, Nataly, and Jost Zetsche. *Found in Translation: How Language Shapes Our Lives and Transforms the World*. New York: Perigee, 2012. Print.
- Kim, W. Chan, and Renee Mauborgne. "Blue Ocean Leadership." *Harvard Business Review*, 92 (5), 2014, 60-72. Print.
- . *Blue Ocean Strategy: How to Create Uncontested Market Space and Make Competition Irrelevant*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2005. Print.
- Kotter, John P. *A Sense of Urgency*. Boston: Harvard Business, 2008. Print.
- Kotter International. *The 8-Step Process for Leading Change*. n.d. <http://www.kotterinternational.com/our-principles/changesteps> Web. 2 September 2014.
- Language Flagship. *What Business Wants: Language Needs in the 21st Century*. July 2009. https://www.thelanguageflagship.org/media/docs/reports/what_business_wants_report_final_7_09.pdf. Web. 1 September 2014.
- Lewis, Benny. *Fluent in 3 Months: How Anyone at Any Age Can Learn to Speak Any Language from Anywhere in the World*. New York, HarperOne, 2014. Print.
- Mackey, Alison. *Wanting it enough: why motivation is the key to language learning*. <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/jun/26/motivation-key-language-learning>. Web 22 March 2015.

- Many Languages One World*. <http://www.els.edu/en/ManyLanguagesOneWorld>. 20 June 2014. Web. 1 September 2014.
- Marcos, Kathleen, and Joy Kreeft Peyton. "Promoting a Language Proficient Society." Center for Applied Linguistics. April 2000. [http://www.cal.org/resource-center/briefs-digests/digests/\(offset\)/75](http://www.cal.org/resource-center/briefs-digests/digests/(offset)/75). Web. 1 September 2014.
- McComb, Chris. *About One in Four Americans Can Hold a Conversation in a Second Language*. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1825/about-one-four-americans-can-hold-conversation-second-language.aspx>. 6 April 2001. Web. 1 September 2014.
- Modern Language Association (MLA). Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2009. 30 December 2010. http://www.mla.org/2009_enrollmentsurvey Web. 1 September 2014.
- . *Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World*. <http://www.mla.org/flreport>. May 2007. Web. 1 September 2014.
- Morsch, Linda. *Why It Pays to Be Bilingual*. <http://jobs.aol.com/articles/2009/01/26/why-it-pays-to-be-bilingual/>. Web. 22 March 2015.
- National Council of State Supervisors for Languages (NCSSFL). States with or Considering Foreign Language Graduation Requirements. Revised March 2010. <http://www.ncssfl.org/docs/States%20with%20Foreign%20Language%20Graduation%20Requirements%20-%20%20Revised%202010.pdf>. Web. 1 September 2014.
- National Research Council. *International Education and Foreign Languages: Keys to Securing America's Future*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2007. http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=11841. Web. 1 September 2014.
- Perkins, James A. "Strength through Wisdom: A Critique of U.S. Capability." *Modern Language Journal* 64 (1), 1980, 9-58. Print.
- Poppick, Susie. *Want to Boost Your Salary? Try Learning German* <http://time.com/money/137042/foreign-language-fluency-pay-salary/> Web. 22 March 2015.
- Pufahl, Ingrid, et al. "What We Can Learn from Foreign Language Teaching in Other Countries." Center for Applied Linguistics. September 2001. [http://www.cal.org/resource-center/briefs-digests/digests/\(offset\)/120](http://www.cal.org/resource-center/briefs-digests/digests/(offset)/120). Web. 1 September 2014.
- Simon, Paul. *The Tongue-Tied American: Confronting the Foreign Language Crisis*. New York: Continuum, 1980. Print.
- Stein-Smith, Kathleen. Kathleen Stein-Smith at TEDx Fairleigh Dickinson University. *The U.S. Foreign Language Deficit – What It Is; Why It Matters; and What We Can Do about It*. <http://view.fdu.edu/default.aspx?id=7509>. Web. 3 September 2014.

- United States. Department of Defense. *The Defense Language Transformation Roadmap*. January 2005. <http://www.defense.gov/news/mar2005/d20050330roadmap.pdf>. Web. 1 September 2014.
- United States. Department of State. *National Security Language Initiative* (NSLI). January 2006. <http://web.archive.org/web/20080929044930/http://exchanges.state.gov/NSLI/>. Web. 1 September 2014.
- United States. Senate. *Closing the Language Gap: Improving the Federal Government's Foreign Language Capabilities*. 29 July 2010. <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-111shrg58407/html/CHRG-111shrg58407.htm>. Web. 1 September 2014.
- . *A National Security Crisis: Foreign Language Capabilities in the Federal Government*. 21 May 2012. <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-112shrg75214/pdf/CHRG-112shrg75214.pdf>. Web. 1 September 2014.
- Wiley, Terrence G. "A 'Languages for Jobs' Initiative: Policy Innovation Memorandum No. 24." *Renewing America*. June 2012. <http://www.cfr.org/united-states/languages-jobs-initiative/p28396>. Web. 1 September 2014.