

Le Français: Langue mondiale, langue locale – The Case for French in the United States

by Kathy Stein-Smith

French is a global language with a local touch.

French is spoken by over 200 million people around the world, and the *Organisation internationale de la Francophonie* (OIF) currently includes 80 members. French is one of the 6 official languages of the United Nations and is a working language of the European Union. It is also in the top 3 languages used in international business. French is the second most widely studied language in the world, with 120 million students worldwide. France is the 5th largest economy in the world, and Paris is the top student city in the world. French culture is world-renowned, and French have had global influence for centuries. The voyage of the replica ship, *L'Hermione*, evoking French assistance to the U.S. during the American Revolution, was viewed and followed online around the world in 2015.

French is a U.S. language, spoken at home by more than 2 million Americans and a significant language in 11 states. French is the second most widely studied language in the U.S., with 1.5 million students. A quick look at a map of the U.S. confirms that much of what is now the United States was part of the French colonial empire, and French ideas played a major role in the American Revolution. France is one of the top trading partners of the U.S., and nearly 5,000 French-owned companies operate in the U.S., providing over half a million American jobs. Americans have long been among the most frequent visitors to France, and American writers and artists have long chosen Paris, and France, as their creative home. France is also among the leading destinations for U.S. students studying abroad.

The importance of French culture and ideas, the historical influence of French language and culture on the U.S., and the number of heritage language and other speakers of French would already make a strong case for the promotion of French language skills. However, French transcends the role of heritage language, no matter how significant that may be, to become an important language for international education in a globalized world, and for transnational careers in a globalized workplace, where Francophone culture is worldwide, with members of the Francophonie on every continent.

Career opportunities for those with French language skills include careers in education, in government, and in business -- in language services, working for French companies in the U.S. and in France, as well as for U.S. companies doing business in France. In addition, French language skills are useful in a wide range of careers where knowledge of other languages and cultures and cultural intelligence (CQ) enhance an already existing professional skill. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, jobs in language services are predicted to increase by 46%, much faster than average.

In order for us to re-connect with our French cultural heritage, to develop a skill that can either form the foundation of a career, or enhance an existing professional career path, and to effectively navigate the Francophone communities that exist both locally and globally, increasing the level of French language skills in the U.S. is essential, and *Action cadienne* says it best – “*étant donné qu'il est impossible de concevoir une culture sans parler sa langue.*”

The challenge is to increase awareness of the importance and value of French language skill and knowledge of French and Francophone skills, increase sustainable motivation for the continued study of French, and to provide the opportunity to present and prospective French language learners to begin and to pursue the study of French.

The U.S. Foreign Language Deficit and Its Impact on Foreign Language Education

The case for French, however, does not stand alone, but rather, must be viewed within the context of the U.S. foreign language deficit.

Only 25% of Americans consider themselves able to hold a conversation in a language other than English, and if recent immigrants and other heritage language speakers are taken into consideration, the actual number rests at around 10%, this in contrast to Europe, where 56% of adults report the ability to hold a conversation in at least one additional language, 28% report that they are able to hold a conversation in two additional languages, and 11% report that they are able to hold a conversation in three additional languages. Moreover, in the U.S., the vast majority of students do not study foreign languages: only 18.5% K-12 public school students according to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL); and, according to the Modern Language Association (MLA), only 8.1% of college and university students are enrolled in a course in a language other than English, this compared to virtually all student in Europe and beyond. Not only does the U.S. not have an official language, but many states do not have a foreign language requirement for high school graduation, and many colleges and universities do not enforce existing foreign language requirements.

The U.S. foreign language deficit has been determined to have a negative impact on our economic and national security, and on our ability to navigate effectively through a multilingual and multicultural society at home and a globalized world and workplace. The need for foreign language skills has been documented through government reports and academic research, but U.S. students and workers tend to be reluctant to learn another language, believing (erroneously) that, as English is the global *lingua franca*, there is no need to learn another language. In fact, 75% of the world's population does not speak English, and the need to speak other languages in the world of business and beyond is supported by the famous quote attributed to Willy Brandt – “If I’m selling to you, I speak your language. If I’m buying, *dann müssen Sie Deutsch sprechen!*” The negative impact of the U.S. foreign language deficit has been clearly demonstrated, but little progress has been made in effectively addressing it.

French as an American Language – Past and Present

French is a global language with a local touch, a global language and culture with strong American roots and vigorous French-speaking communities in the U.S.

According to the U.S. census, over 2 million people speak French in the U.S. French is the 4th most widely spoken in the U.S., with French the most frequently spoken language after English in Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Louisiana. After English and Spanish, French is the most frequently spoken language in the additional states of Connecticut, Maryland, Delaware, West Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Mississippi.

French speakers in the U.S. include heritage language speakers in New England and Louisiana, new arrivals in New York and other ports of entry, and expats concentrated on both coasts, but to be found across the country. It is interesting to note that South Florida is home to the fastest-growing French-speaking community in the country, primarily newly-arrived Haitian immigrants and Haitian Americans.

In addition to native speakers, French is also the most widely studied language in the U.S. after Spanish, with 1,254,243 K-12 public school students studying French according to the most recent ACTFL survey, and 216,419 college and university students enrolled in French courses according to the most recent MLA data.

However, many Americans do not always realize to what extent French language and Francophone culture are woven into the fabric of our history, our values, and our daily lives today, whether through the presence of expats, recent immigrants, and heritage language speakers, or through typically American values and behaviors.

French may not be as foreign as we may think. In fact, French may not be a foreign language at all! U.S. movie stars Bradley Cooper, Johnny Depp, and Jodie Foster speak French, as does our Secretary of State, John Kerry. Iconic First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy spoke French, as did several of our Founding Fathers. Americans spent almost \$47M on French products in 2014, France, one of the world's largest economies, is a major trading partner of the U.S. Almost 5,000 French companies operate in the U.S. providing over 650,000 American jobs. For those of us who live in the northeast corridor in the U.S., Amtrak's Acela is a familiar name in business travel, manufactured for Amtrak by Quebec's Bombardier company. The very water we drink may be Perrier or Evian, or may come directly from our faucets, provided by Suez.

French is also an American language, one of Canada's 2 official languages, and spoken in Haiti, Saint Martin, Guadeloupe, Martinique, and St. Pierre and Miquelon. It a U.S. language, both currently and historically, beginning with the presence of French words in our English language. It is estimated that 30% of English words are of French provenance, some dating back to the Norman Conquest, while others more recent, like *au pair* or *parkour*, remain visibly French and/or refer to a concept of French provenance. Any map of colonial North America features a wide swath of French territory, extending from Quebec to New Orleans and including Detroit (which includes the island of Gross Ile, literally “Big Island” in French), St. Louis, Louisville, Des Moines, and Baton Rouge.

Place names from Detroit to Boise to Baton Rouge bear witness to the French presence through much of the U.S. The state of Minnesota, lynch-pin of the French strategy for North America has *L'Étoile du Nord* as its state motto.

French ideas of the Enlightenment influenced the American Revolution, with several of the Founding Fathers spending time in Paris to win French support. The Marquis de Lafayette is a prominent figure in the history of the American revolution, and France was the first nation to recognize the young republic. Americans artists and writers who have made Paris their creative home have included Henry James, Edith Wharton, Josephine Baker, James Baldwin, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

During the 18th century, French was the *lingua franca* of Europe and beyond, reflecting the power of the ideas of the Enlightenment and of a worldview with widespread appeal. So much of our identity as Americans is deeply rooted in France, and its history and culture. Much of colonial North America -- from Quebec to Louisiana -- was French, and our own American revolution was inspired by French ideas. The expulsion, or *grand dérangement*, of the Acadians brought French Canadians to the east coast of the U.S. and to Louisiana. Our Founding Fathers went to Paris to plead for the American cause, in French, and the Marquis de Lafayette is a hero of the American Revolution. The U.S., led by Benedict Arnold even invaded Quebec, by then under British military rule.

Just as we are the heirs to our British colonial past, and part of what is now the United States was for centuries part of the Spanish colonial empire, our national history and heritage would not be complete without including French as a U.S language and culture - past, present, and future.

After the *siècle des Lumières* had ended, American fashionistas and Francophiles flocked to Paris for art and culture, as did Henry James and other expatriate American writers and artists. Nearly 1 million French Canadians migrated to the U.S., primarily to New England, creating a vibrant Franco-American presence throughout the region. America's entry into World War I has been credited with both raising French morale and hastening the end of the war. During the *entre-deux-guerres*, Paris was home to American writers including Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. All too soon, however, American forces were once again in France, and soon after the war had ended, Americans like Jacqueline Bouvier, Susan Sontag, Angela Davis were transformed by their study abroad experience in Paris. Americans continued their traditional role as visitors to France, only slightly diminished in the new millennium.

French language and culture also part of the general American lifestyle. We routinely refer to people as *chic* or as having *panache*, and social gatherings often begin with *hors d'oeuvre* and may include French fries. The global concept of being "cool" comes from the French penchant for being effortlessly elegant. While most of us have heard of iconic French designers like Chanel and Yves St. Laurent, many of us are less aware that stores that we frequent in our local malls are actually French. Popular stores include BCBG (bon chic bon genre) and LVHM (Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessey), both of which have deep French roots.

It is estimated that 30% of the words in English are French or of French origin, and these words reflect the significance of French achievement and influence recognized internationally. Among the many examples of French influence in the very English we speak, while we may no longer recognize as French words like mansion, mutton, or beef, more recent and more specialized terms in areas where French influence has been noteworthy include the fine and performing arts, with terms like sculpture, ballet, bas-relief, pas de deux, art déco, pirouette, plié, trompe l'oeil, film noir, etc. Fashion terms that have come from French include peau de soie, crêpe de Chine, chic, faux, haute couture, eau de Cologne, and many more. The eponymous boutique BCBG Max Azria uses the French term bon chic bon genre as its name. Culinary terms include haute cuisine, sauté, petit four, fondue, nouvelle cuisine, purée, maître d'hôtel, flambée, fleur de sel, foie gras, au gratin, au jus, and many more. Lifestyle terms include savoir-faire, sang froid, joie de vivre, passé, faux pas, je ne sais quoi, fiancé(e) etc. In addition, military and diplomatic terms like coup d'État, attaché, and many more come to us from French.

The Economic Influence of France Globally and Locally

The French economy ranks 5th in the world, and over 4,000 French companies operate in the U.S. According to the U.S. Census, France is the 8th most important trading partner with the U.S., accounting for \$31.2B in U.S. exports and \$47B in imports in 2014. French companies and French companies provide 650,000 jobs for U.S. workers.

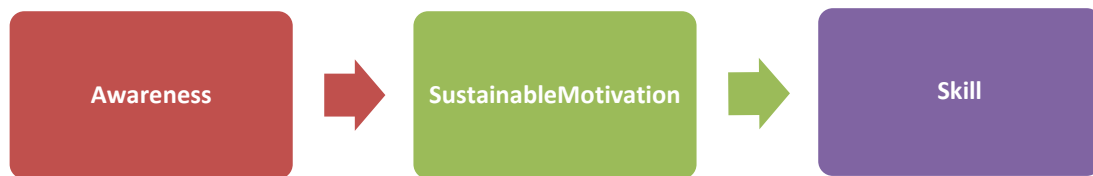
France is home to 31 of Fortune's Global 500, ranking 4th behind only the U.S., China, and Japan. French companies AXA, Air France, L'Oréal, LVMH, GDF-Suez, Veolia Environnement, Michelin, and BNP Paribas are among the world leaders in their respective fields, which range from insurance to energy. Other global leaders among French companies include Total, Carrefour, Danone, Sanofi Aventis, and Publicis.

Many of us may know that France is a significant world economy, but we may not realize the extent of French economic influence in the U.S., including U.S. exports and jobs. According to Census.gov, in 2014, U.S exports to France totaled over \$300M, and France is among the top trading partners (8th) of the U.S. According to the French Embassy in the U.S., France is “one of the top five foreign investors in the United States. Over 4,600 French companies conduct business in the U.S., providing over 650,000 American jobs.” According to the Charlotte Regional Portal, over 60 French firms operate in Charlotte, North Carolina, and according to Globe-Gate, over 90 New Jersey companies were subsidiaries of French companies. According to NOLA, “France is the foreign country that has the most companies present in the 5 priority industry clusters identified by the New Orleans Business Alliance as strategic to further growth in New Orleans.” Among the largest foreign-owned companies in Massachusetts, “France leads all countries with six companies on the list.”

Overcoming the Disconnect between the Importance of the French Language and the Current Level of French Language Skills in the U.S.

The challenge is to overcome the disconnect between the need for French language skills and our current level of skill. It is a triple challenge -- of increasing awareness, motivation, and skills. While awareness and motivation may be closely related in many cases, there are two very distinct phases of motivation for the foreign language learner -- motivation to consider, or even to begin, foreign language study, and motivation to continue study to reach proficiency, or even fluency. Skill is closely related to motivation, which is the best predictor of a successful foreign language learning outcome, and to the resulting continued study of a particular language.

Overcoming the Disconnect -- The Foreign Language Learning Challenge



In order to increase awareness, French language educators and advocates must work together, devoting time and effort to getting the word out about the benefits of learning French. We must become storytellers and tell the story of the value of acquiring French language skills and knowledge of Francophone culture, ranging from cultural and communicative value to career and professional value. It should be a message of empowerment, designed to appeal to a broad range of learners and potential learners and a broad range of language learning goals. The example of U.S. French-speaking celebrities and public figures, as well as aspects of French culture that have crossed into the American popular culture (fashion, movies, music, sports, etc.) can be used to increase awareness and motivation.

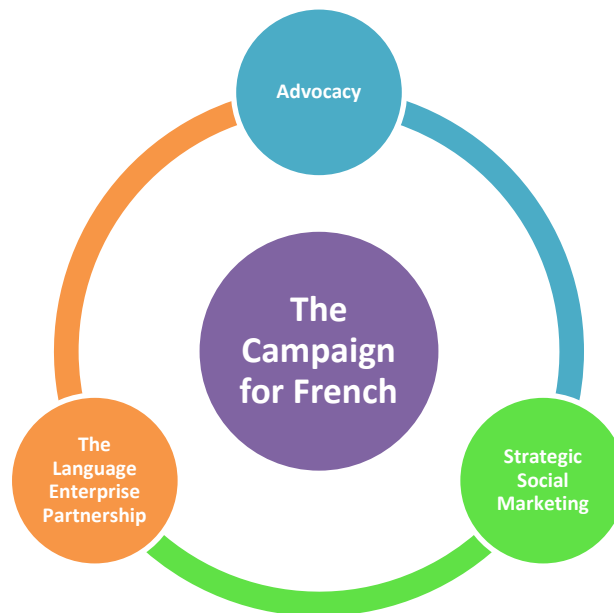
While effectively increasing awareness is intended to increase motivation, it is also necessary to consider both rewards and requirements in a strategic campaign. In the case of French language skills, competitions and contests are wonderful ways to sustain and increase motivation where interest already exists. The professional foreign language associations, including the American Association of Teachers of French, offer contests, honor societies, and scholarships, etc., in order to reward language learning achievement. The “Many Languages One World” Essay Contest and Global Youth Forum, sponsored by ELS Educational Services and the United Nations Academic Impact, intended to promote multilingualism and the continued study of the six official languages of the United Nations, is a wonderful motivational event, culminating in an opportunity to present in the student's target language at the General Assembly. The *Forum mondial de*

la langue française, sponsored by the *Organisation internationale de la Francophonie*, is another wonderful example of rewarding French language skills.

The Campaign for French

The campaign for French needs to incorporate current theory and practice in leadership and in change management and to include the broadest possible coalition of stakeholders. Advocacy, a strategic social marketing campaign, and the "language enterprise" partnership form the foundation of the campaign for foreign languages.

The Campaign for French -- Advocacy, Strategic Social Marketing, and the Language Enterprise Partnership



In addition to the existing advocacy, an effective social marketing campaign must identify its audience in the broadest sense, to include all present and potential French language learners, including heritage language speakers, as well as adult and non-traditional learners, and must make effective use of current and emerging technology to connect with them, whether they are in a traditional classroom, a community center, a corporate campus, or online, in order to get buy-in and engagement from the widest possible stakeholder base. It should be grounded in current theory and best practices of strategic social marketing and change management and include a “blue ocean strategy” to expand and develop support for foreign language where it may not have existed before. It should include elements of “disruptive innovation,” including interdisciplinarity, service learning, experiential learning, outreach to local language communities, etc., as well as a competitive strategy in order to win over support and obtain needed resources

and funding. Change management is also needed in order to effect a paradigm shift in French language learning. Traditionally, change management has traditionally been viewed as a generally linear process driven forward by a core group. However, more recent thinking has indicated that a more fluid and dynamic process may be more effective, and it is important for an effective campaign to be agile. The ability to offer a broad umbrella to both traditional and non-traditional stakeholders and to maximize a wide range of methods is essential in order to bring about the needed paradigm shift in attitudes toward foreign language learning.

The “language enterprise” partnership of education, government, and private enterprise, as defined by Rivers, offers a synergy of funding, employment, and the professional expertise needed to educate future professionals in needed foreign language skills. NAFSA's global partners and global affiliates, JNCL-NCLIS’ corporate members, the OIF's *Forum mondiale de la langue française*, and the “Many Languages One World” Essay Contest and Global Youth Forum, sponsored by the United Nations Academic Impact and ELS Educational Services, Inc., are examples of the “language enterprise” partnership at work, and high-profile events like “Many Languages One World” are wonderful ways for present and future language learners to see the rewards and benefits of acquiring foreign language skills.

The commitment and active involvement of the French government in the promotion of the French language worldwide is an integral part of the campaign for French. According to “France and the Promotion of French Worldwide,” 700 French government staff works to promote the French language worldwide, and almost 1 million students are enrolled in French classes at the 132 Instituts français and 445 Alliances françaises worldwide. France spends more than 600 million euros each year promoting French worldwide. It is the largest contributor country to the International Organisation of La Francophonie (OIF). There are 800 Alliances françaises around the world, 111 of which are located in the United States. The OIF and the Centre de la francophonie des Ameriques also support the French language worldwide.

Encouraging Signs -- French-Language Immersion Education and Interdisciplinarity

The increase in French-language immersion programs is an encouraging sign. Just as motivation is generally considered the best predictor of a successful foreign language learning outcome, immersion is considered the most effective method.

Most immersion programs are found in public schools, with Louisiana a long-time national leader in French language immersion and in immersion generally, and New York City/Brooklyn a relative newcomer with a vigorous program. These programs include well over 100 schools, public and private, where French is a language of instruction, among which is the “révolution bilingue” (Jaumont) in the New York City public schools. With more than 1,000 students, it is noteworthy for the fact that it is a public school program, demonstrating a collaborative partnership of parents, teachers, and school administrators. In “Building Bilingual Communities: New York's French

Bilingual Revolution,” Ross and Jaumont highlight the importance of the partnership of school leadership, teachers, and parents (244).

In “The French Bilingual Revolution,” Jaumont wrote that “there are more than 130 schools in 27 states and 80 cities that offer instruction in both French and English in public schools in the United States. These include French immersion bilingual programs for non-French speakers and dual language education programs for both Francophones and Anglophones. Both of these programs are offered in public and charter schools. Additionally, there are 50 bilingual programs in private schools that serve mainly expatriate families but also include local families who can pay the often high tuition and fees. Finally, there are other forms of home language support for Francophone students, including French Heritage Language programs for Francophone students in public schools and community-based organizations.” Jaumont has insightfully described the “révolution bilingue” as incorporating, yet transcending, heritage languages in New York, a global city, and in a globalized world, and the success of the “révolution bilingue” has encouraged the growth of a master's program in French immersion education at CUNY's Hunter College.

Another noteworthy French-language immersion program is in New Orleans and Louisiana, with approximately 30 participating schools. In addition, international schools like the Ecole française internationale de Philadelphie, and the Lycée français de New-York provide varying levels of immersion experience. According to the Association of the French Schools in America (AFSA), there are currently 50 AFSA schools in the US and Canada, of which 43 are in the U.S. In addition, Concordia University's Language Villages and the Summer Language Schools at Middlebury College, now in their centennial year, are noteworthy for their family programs and language pledge, respectively.

In the context of postsecondary education, Antonin Baudry, in his role as Cultural Counselor of the French Embassy in the U.S., has championed interdisciplinarity as key to “French –American cultural exchange” and went on to speak of the “interdisciplinary collaboration between America and the French-speaking world” as part of a November 2013 panel discussion on “Why French Matters,” at the Maison Française at Columbia University, where he highlighted the Francophonie and the complex and dynamic role of French as a global language and the importance of interdisciplinarity and interdisciplinary studies. In his *Columbia Centennial Celebration Speech*, Baudry went on to examine the increase in the number of students studying French in the U.S. and increased collaborations between French and American universities, at a time that many French departments -- and other humanities areas -- in the U.S. are threatened, primarily due to budgetary reasons. He went on to highlight the role of interdisciplinarity in research across the disciplines and the role that it could play in the sustainability of French and French Studies and mentioned French government support for French interdisciplinary studies as “a tool to foster French departments in the U.S.” and proposed a task force. Both Jaumont and Baudry have emphasized the importance of partnerships in the sustainability of French language education in the U.S.

Conclusions and Future Directions -- The Language Enterprise Partnerships

The future of French in the U.S. is up to us. The future can be bright if we choose to be inspired by the “révolution bilingue” and to reflectively build a campaign for French based on current theory and practice, and on our past and present relationship with French language and culture as we move into a globalized and multicultural present and future, and in collaboration with the “language enterprise” partnership, including French government commitment and efforts to promote French worldwide, international organizations like the OIF and the *Centre de la Francophonie des Amériques*, heritage language speakers, and local community supporters and advocates, including “Francophiles.”

It is equally important to re-examine French language education in the U.S. and to re-consider the concepts of “translingual” and “transcultural” competence, and of “multiple pathways to the major,” as articulated in the MLA report, *Foreign Language and Higher Education*. As we have seen, French is an American language and always has been. The global appeal and soft power of French language and Francophone culture cannot be over-stated. Globally, French is spoken around the world, and a recent study has predicted that French will be the most widely spoken language in the world by 2050. Not only are U.S. history and culture firmly rooted in the French language and French ideas, but our present is equally linked to French and Francophone language and values, and our future is predicted to evolve in a majority Francophone globalized world. French is not a foreign language, but rather a truly American one -- past, present, and future. Knowledge of the French language and of Francophone culture around the world can only empower U.S. students to enhance their careers, to more effectively navigate our multilingual and multicultural society, to study abroad more impactfully, and to become better global citizens.

What is needed is collaborative dual language enterprise partnership -- of academia, government, and private enterprise, and -- of foreign language education, English as a second language education, international education, and education for global citizenship. As Kotter wrote, what is needed is “a sense of urgency.”

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